

University of Warwick institutional repository: <http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap>

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD at the University of Warwick

<http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap/36344>

This thesis is made available online and is protected by original copyright.

Please scroll down to view the document itself.

Please refer to the repository record for this item for information to help you to cite it. Our policy information is available from the repository home page.

Decadence and Sexual Politics
in
Three *Fin-de-Siècle* Writers:
Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons and Vernon Lee

Catherine Ruth Robbins

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Warwick

Department of English and Comparative Literature

November, 1996

Contents

Summary	
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Traditions of Nineteenth-Century Criticism	17
Chapter Two: Towards a Definition of Decadence	36
Chapter Three: 'Style, not sincerity': Wilde's Early Poems	69
Chapter Four: <i>The Sphinx</i> and <i>The Ballad</i> : Learning the Poetics of Restraint	105
Chapter Five: Arthur Symons — The Decadent Critic as Artist	137
Chapter Six: A Poetics of Decadence: Arthur Symons's <i>Days and Nights</i> and <i>Silhouettes</i>	165
Chapter Seven: 'Telling the Dancer from the Dance': Arthur Symon's <i>London Nights</i>	185
Chapter Eight: Vernon Lee: Decadent Woman?	211
Afterword: 'And upon this body we may press our lips'	240
Bibliography of Works Quoted and Consulted	244

List of Illustrations, bound between pages 136 and 137

- Figure 1: 'The Sterner Sex', *Punch*, 26 November, 1891
- Figure 2: 'Our Decadents', *Punch*, 7 July, 1894
- Figure 3: 'Our Decadents', *Punch*, 27 October, 1894
- Figure 4: Edward Burne-Jones, *Pygmalion and the Image* (1878), nos 1-3
- Figure 5: Edward Burne-Jones, *Pygmalion and the Image* (1878), no. 4
- Figure 6: Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Sculptor's Model* (1878)
- Figure 7: 'Distinguished Amateurs — 2: The Art Critic', *Punch*, 13 March, 1880

Summary

An understanding of the concept of decadence in the late nineteenth century is not dependent on a purely linguistic approach to the various forms of literary language in which it might be manifested. Rather, the label of decadence invokes (and deliberately flouts) perceptions of normality in a number of cultural spaces, not all of them strictly textual. Importantly, the personality of the artist figure is also a part of the definition of decadence. Decadence, that is, is not limited to a particular mode of textual performance; it is also a matter of how the artist's personality is interpreted through a critical assumption current throughout the nineteenth century, that the text acts as an index of the moral status of the writer. Decadence, then, is about reception, as well as conception.

Given that meaning accrues to the figure of the artist in the definition of decadence, and given that the late nineteenth century was a period of conflicting discourses of sexual politics, the definition of decadence is bound up with the matrix of associations around such concepts as sex, gender and sexuality.

The three writers at the centre of this study all demonstrate decadent potential in their refusals to respect the conventions of gender — both in terms of the subjects and forms they each chose for literary representation, and for the choices they made about the living of their lives.

In his poetry Wilde took up a series of dramatic poses, inconsistent with each other, inconsistent even within single poems. In doing so, he called into question prevailing standards and ideals of masculinity — sincerity and purposiveness — and he was attacked for doing so even before he was tried for gross indecency in 1895.

Symons's subject matter — the preponderance in his poetry of the liminal figures of the dancer and the actress, and the liminal spaces of the music-hall and deserted city streets at night — explicitly courted a decadent label, and, indeed, Symons helped to define the term. Contemporary audiences read his poetic persona back onto his personality. And his decadence, like Wilde's, also came from his flouting of the rules of masculinity, in his case, his exposure of the gender and class ideology of the gentleman, by speaking aloud of its implications.

That decadence has an importance for sexual politics is signalled by the fact that there are very few women writers who seem to 'suit' the label. Vernon Lee provides a test case here of the argument that decadence is to be defined primarily as a falling away from an idealised standard of masculinity. Lee wrote impeccably decadent fiction, but is not generally thought of as a decadent writer, perhaps precisely because she was a woman writer for whom a term that resides in conventions of the masculine is inappropriate.

Decadence is a notoriously difficult term to define, and this thesis attempts to show a range of definitions of the word in terms of its favoured themes, forms and their relation to ideas of artistic personality; it shows that the label is inextricably bound up in the sexuality debates of the 1890s.

Introduction

In *Punch* for 16 September, 1891, there appeared a cartoon captioned 'The Sterner Sex' in which two young women, dressed severely in straight skirts and buttoned-up blouses are observed in conversation.

'Hullo, Gerty! You've got Fred's hat on, and his cover coat?'

'Yes. Don't you like it?'

'Well — it makes you look like a Young Man, you know, and that's so Effeminate.'¹ (Figure 1)

The cartoon represents just one of a whole series of ironic commentaries on the gender confusion of the 1890s with which this study is, in part, concerned. The certainties of earlier generations in relation to the apparently natural relative places of men and women seemed, by the 1890s, to be threatened by assertive women such as those in the cartoon, and the 'unnaturally' effeminate men to whom the cartoon makes reference. As Sally Ledger has suggested, 'gender was arguably the most destabilizing category' of the cultural politics of the fin de siècle, and it was destabilizing because gender as category, the 'natural' places of man and woman in society was, and is, itself unstable.² Earlier in the century, as Alison Hennegan suggests, there had been a sense of stability in definition as to the precise meanings of gender classifications. A man's manliness referred to his adult status, and was contrasted to 'childishness.' But, 'by the end of the century, "manliness" is constantly defined in opposition to "womanliness": to be a "real man" is to avoid the appalling stigma of effeminacy.'³ As Elaine Showalter puts it, 'while many critics and historians have described this period [the 1890s] as a battle *between* the sexes, a period of sexual antagonism that came from male resentment of women's emancipation, ... it was also a battle *within* the sexes.'⁴ The 1890s was a period of contested definitions of masculinity and femininity, of gender roles, and of sexuality, a period of cultural crisis precipitated by, amongst other things, the looming end of the century. The future looked uncertain, particularly in contrast to the 'Golden Age' of the sexual certainty of the mid-century. Once upon a time, 'When Adam delved and Eve span,/ None need ask which was the man'.⁵ Now the natural passivity and

domesticity of woman, and the worldly action of man were challenged: by women who dared leave the home, to seek education and employment rather than love, marriage, motherhood and masculine protection; and by men who were powerless to resist their challenge, or who even gloried in the freedom and opportunity that female emancipation apparently offered to them.

The Golden Age of the past and the uncertainties of the present were both fictitious. Writers such as Lynda Nead and Mary Poovey have demonstrated that because gender is always a socially constructed phenomenon rather than a naturally occurring biological fact, questions about the relative social positions of the sexes had recurred with varying degrees of ideological urgency throughout the nineteenth century. The nostalgia for a Golden Age when men were real men, and 'we had no trouble with *our wives*',⁶ is, in Poovey's phrase, a function of the 'ideological work of gender'.⁷ Lynda Nead identifies the 1860s as the cultural highpoint of the doctrine of the separate spheres, which insisted that women were caring, nurturing and domesticated whilst men were active, virile and competitive. Men and women complemented but did not compete each with each other. But at the same time as these high ideals of gender (at least for the middle classes) were perpetuated by high culture, Parliament passed the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869 which provided for the forcible registration and medical examination of prostitutes in certain garrison towns, to prevent the spread of venereal disease amongst the military. Here was official recognition that not all men and women behaved as myths of sexuality or gender ideology assumed them to; moreover, the Acts provoked a ferocious feminist campaign amongst middle-class women for their repeal on the grounds that they enacted a sexual double standard by registering and punishing the women involved in paid sex, but not the men. It was concerted campaigning by middle-class women which eventually led to the repeal of the acts in 1883. So much for domesticated doves of femininity.⁸ Just as importantly, the eventual passage of the 1882 Married Women's Property Act 'revolutionized the law' and led, according to Lee Halcombe, potentially to the greatest redistribution of property that Britain had ever seen.⁹ Women were being seen in all aspects of public

life, and whilst they had not yet achieved anything like equality, the change in their status was a highly visible sign that the old rules no longer held true. The effects of these massive social changes were not only felt by women. Men felt that their own position was being eroded and spoke of a decline in moral standards which somehow accounted for these uppity women. And in the 1890s, changes in social and political circumstances took on an apocalyptic significance because, says Frank Kermode, 'we project our existential anxieties onto history; there is a real correlation between the ends of centuries and the peculiarity of our imagination, that it chooses always to be at the end of an era.'¹⁰

Decadence is one of the names that is given to the sense of unease which was engendered by rapidly changing social and sexual relations in the historical context of the century's impending end. It is the usage of this term with which the present study is concerned. Decadence means many other things as well as conflicting gender roles, as Chapter One will show. It has overtones of the decline of nationhood and the fall of empire. It means, in literary usage, both experimental forms and unconventional — even 'unnatural' — subject matter. And, following the traditions of *ad hominem* nineteenth-century literary criticism, it implies a strong link between text and writer, so that textual unconventionality is read as an index of unconventionality on the part of the writer in the world beyond the text. When Wilde deliberately blurred the distinction between life and art, he took an author-centred critical tradition to its logical conclusion: text and writer were rendered inseparable and, by extension, readers were implicated in the moral tone of what they chose to read. Yet for all these extended meanings of decadence, the symptom most seized upon at the time was that of the altering relations between the sexes, as they manifested themselves in conflicts about the meaning of gender, sex and sexuality. It is for this reason that I have chosen the phrase 'sexual politics' to describe the cultural effects of decadence, since sexual politics implies that sex, gender and sexuality exist in a complex matrix of competing discourses.

This study is not a comprehensive survey of all the meanings of decadence. Nor does it propose to deal with all the works of the three writers it takes as case studies. It

operates instead as series of theoretical interventions into the discourses of decadence, in order to try to define the word in such a way that it is a usable literary category for a particular period of literary history, namely the thirty years or so from 1880-1910. Like all periodizations, this one is 'based on the arbitrary calendar'.¹¹ But it was in the 1890s that decadence became an important cultural category, and by the end of the century, it had, for various reasons, including the premature deaths of many of the chief players, and the exigencies of the Wilde trials in April and May, 1895, more or less ceased to function as such. The primary focus will, therefore be on the years 1890-1900, with some wandering on either side of these dates where such wandering is appropriate.

The theoretical bearings of this study come from a variety of sources, both contemporary and historical. Since it is concerned with sexual politics, there is a basis in feminist and gay and lesbian theories of literature and culture. At different times, Michel Foucault's writings on the history of sexuality and transgression become important, as does Freud's disquisition on 'The Uncanny' and Kristeva's theorizations of the subjects of enunciation and utterance. These are all, in some sense, theories of liminality, which draw their impetus from the exploration of border spaces, spaces *between*. As such they are significant for the theorization of decadence, since this too is a liminal cultural phenomenon, taking place *between* the binaries of life and art, natural and artificial, male and female, masculine and feminine, conventional and unconventional, 'evanescence and stabilization'.¹² The questions raised here are primarily textual since, in Derrida's famous phrase in *Of Grammatology*, '*There is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside text; *il n'y a pas de hors texte*].'¹³ But the study seeks also to undertake an extra-textual dimension inasmuch as it assumes that what is *in* the text has a bearing on the world apparently *beyond* the text, rendering — as nineteenth-century critics also did — the border between text and non-text blurred and uncertain. In the process of author-centred criticism in the nineteenth century, 'real' life itself is textualized and the blurring of the distinction between life and writing (or life and art) is one of the places in which decadence — the writing and reading of decadent texts — takes place.

In reading another of Derrida's works, *The Truth in Painting*, it becomes clear that the distinction between what is in the text and what is outside it is a temporary and unstable fiction. He writes:

the whole analytic of aesthetic judgment forever assumes that one can distinguish rigorously between the intrinsic and the extrinsic. ... Hence, one must know — this is a fundamental presupposition, presupposing what is fundamental — how to determine the intrinsic — what is framed — and know what one is excluding as frame *and* outside — the — frame.¹⁴

The name that he gives to the liminal space between outside and inside is the 'parergon.' It is with the parergon that the definition of decadence is concerned as Chapters One and Two will demonstrate. Decadence is a slippery and liminal term, for a number of reasons. It is a term concerned with transgressive energy, crossing and re-crossing the limit between the acceptable or norm and that which is beyond the pale; it is liminal because its usage is traditionally uncertain, meaning different things to different groups; it is liminal because its definition often has to do with the troubled boundary between life and art; and it is liminal because one of its origins in English literary usage is in the contested meanings and values of gender and sexuality. Writing of lesbian and gay theory, Diana Fuss has argued that the slash line (/) between inside and outside is the site of creative deconstruction. 'What we need most urgently ...,' she writes, 'is a theory of marginality, subversion, dissidence and othering. What we need is a theory of sexual borders that will help us to come to terms with, and to organize around, the new cultural and sexual arrangements occasioned by the movements and transmutations of pleasure in the social field.' In practical terms, the literary decadence of the late-nineteenth century has little to teach contemporary gay men and lesbians: the past will not act as a model for political action. But decadence is an example of a theory of sexual borders: and it can be read as a theory of marginality, subversion, dissidence and othering, a cultural example of the theory for which Diana Fuss calls.¹⁵

If, following Derrida, the prime obligation in the critical reading and theorization of the literary text is to define *what* we are looking at, then the case of decadence with its fluid boundaries and marginal status disrupts ease of focus. This study examines a number of texts by three writers written and published around the end of the last

century. The aim is to look both at the intrinsic textual qualities which might be described as 'decadent', as well as to consider some part of the extrinsic matrix of meaning which the word appeared to have. The 'what' which is at stake here has troubled boundaries and there is no simple principle by which one can decide what decadence is in order to see it 'as in itself it really is.' What the decadence of the 1890s dramatizes is precisely the loss of a simple faith in the world as it had always been seen and understood, a loss of faith predicated on continuing debates about sex, gender and sexuality throughout the nineteenth century.

The writers discussed here, Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), Arthur Symons (1865-1945) and Vernon Lee (1856-1935, pseudonym of Violet Paget), were near contemporaries, but they share more than the historical accident of simultaneity. For one thing, all three were profoundly influenced by writings of Walter Horatio Pater; they all sought his company, and, to some extent, his approval for their own literary projects. Richard Ellmann informs us that Wilde 'did not meet Pater in person until his third year at Oxford [1877], but during his first term [c. October, 1874] he came under the spell of his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* published the year before. He never ceased to speak of it as "my golden book", and in *De Profundis*, he described Pater's work as the "book which has had such a strange influence over my life." Much of it, especially the celebrated "Conclusion" he had by heart.'¹⁶ Pater's *Renaissance* was similarly influential on the young Vernon Lee. She met Pater for the first time in July, 1881, at a dinner given in Oxford by the Humphry Wards, and she was promptly invited by Pater and his sisters for dinner a few days later. This started a regular series of summer visits to the Paters, when Vernon Lee was in England, and a correspondence about her work with Pater, in which he often praised her intelligence, style, intellect and learning.¹⁷ Arthur Symons first read Pater in 1885 on the advice of his former school master; he was intensely excited by Pater's *Renaissance*, and by the extracts of *Marius the Epicurean*, which were appearing in the *Athenaeum*. He sent a copy of his book on Browning to Pater, and treasured Pater's 'pleased' response to it. He first met Pater, at Pater's invitation, in August 1888, and subsequently dedicated his

first volume of poems, *Days and Nights* (1889) to him. He continued to write about Pater for the rest of his career.¹⁸

The choice of Wilde, Symonds and Vernon Lee as subjects for a study such as this comes about because, despite their very obvious differences of style and substance, they share an attitude to writing which might be characterized as decadent. The influence of Pater does not, in itself, make them decadent, but the use to which they put his writings and example might well be an indication. They have also been chosen, however, for the practical consideration that, if, as will be argued here, decadence depends for its definition on sexual politics and the blurring of gender distinctions, the argument requires different standpoints — both biographical and textual — in relation to gender, sexuality and sexual politics in order for the argument to proceed. These three writers represent — though they are not a scientific or representative sample — three differing positions on these issues, positions which might be characterized as: decadence and emergent homosexuality; decadence and the subversion of dominant models of male heterosexuality from within; and, decadence and the buried history of lesbian identity.

This being the case, Wilde is perhaps too obvious and over-determined a choice, famous, as Neil Bartlett says, as ‘*the homosexual*’, and the prime late-nineteenth-century exemplar of what Jonathan Dollimore calls ‘dissident sexuality’.¹⁹ Whilst recent studies by Alan Sinfield, James Eli Adams and Joseph Bristow have sought to problematize Wilde’s iconic status as the representative figure of dandiacal, or effeminate, or decadent homosexuality, the public nature of his fate makes him impossible to ignore in any discussion of the sexual politics of decadence in the 1890s.²⁰ Wilde himself linked text and sex quite explicitly when he wrote in *De Profundis*: ‘What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion.’²¹ One of the consequences of his highly visible personality, his character *as* performance, is that not only is he *the homosexual* figure of the 1890s, he is also *the decadent* figure; for, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes, many of the uses of the word decadent can ‘be simply explained by its being a

euphemism for “homosexuality”.²² Even before Wilde’s first homosexual encounter, with Robert Ross, in around 1886, and before the trials of April and May, 1895 which made Wilde’s sexual activities ‘known’, as early as his years at Oxford, and the publication of his first volume of poetry in 1881, Wilde troubled the separate spheres ideology of masculinity and femininity, both in his person and his writings. The majority of literary critical interest in Wilde’s sexual politics and sexual actions has concentrated on his writings of the late 1880s and the 1890s, and has overlooked the impact of his poetry on the construction of his public persona, and the hostility it provoked. The discussion of Wilde undertaken here focuses on the poems, both in his early career, and beyond, in order to show how he troubled contemporary categories of masculinity through the inconsistency of his poses which elevated style over sincerity and pose over character, and thus subverted a fundamental critical benchmark of his time.

Symons’s link with decadence is also easy to follow. It is a function of the fact that he defined the term in his 1893 essay, ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’ in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*; and, moreover, that he defined it with approval in the early 1890s, and sought in his creative writings to conform to his own definition. His was the only extended sympathetic contemporary treatment of the decadent phenomenon, though he later recanted his support, following the exigencies of the Wilde trials, and renamed the movement Symbolism.²³ This ‘defining’ role is not, however, the only reason for Symons’s place in this study; Symons was also a representative figure of the sexual politics of decadence. In his writings he inhabited the *demi-monde* of dancer, the actress and the harlot in his role as *flâneur* and *voyeur*. His subject matter, that is, disturbs the conventional pieties of what it is permissible to represent. He troubles also the standards of specifically middle-class heterosexual masculinity, by laying bare the implicit double standard of sexual behaviour that gender ideology presupposed and kept ‘decently’ concealed. The mid-century view that male sexuality was active and required some outlet (abstinence being deemed impractical), preferably in marriage, but failing that, with working-class women whether paid or not,

had once been enshrined in the Contagious Diseases Acts, under which women, not men, were forcibly regulated and inspected. What Symons's poetry does is to render visible the sexual relationships between a middle-class man and a number of working (though not necessarily working-class) women, exposing the sexual structures on which sexual ideology was based, but which that ideology, by its very nature as ideology, left deliberately unstated. Symons offended the sexual standard on a number of counts. The sheer number of partners celebrated in his poems, where the woman's heart 'holds many a Romeo' and the poetic persona states with neither bravado nor shame that he too has 'sought on many a breast/ The ecstasy of love's unrest',²⁴ implies and normalizes a transgressive promiscuity. Symons's beloved is never conventionally ideal — virginal, pure and unattainable. She provokes in the male poet an inappropriate depth of emotion and passion, inappropriate because cross-class relations are tolerated because they do not 'matter.' The poet values those feelings for their transience, not their permanence, so that love becomes merely a series of fleeting encounters, in which emotion is invested, but no interest accrues. Both the relationships and the emotions are unacceptable and unrespectable. But the gender implications are more important. Symons's 'virility' is never in doubt in his poetry: but he is 'unmanly' in the sense of 'ungentlemanly'. In his case, decadence is implicated in a betrayal of class, and a betrayal of idealized masculinity.

Both Wilde and Symons were publicly associated with decadence during their lifetimes and beyond. The case of Vernon Lee tests the boundaries of decadence from another direction. Far less is (and was) generally known about her, so that the biographical reading of decadence is immediately problematized, and she tests the thesis that decadence is to be read in terms of biographical performance. She also directs this study to the question of whether sex itself (the biological fact that she was a woman) disqualifies her as a decadent writer: that is, is there any such thing as a decadent woman writer? And in contrast to both Wilde and Symons, Vernon Lee's sex life is a mystery. Her texts do not make for an easy identification of sexual preference. From biographical evidence, though she may have had a strong attraction to women, there is

no clear lesbian identification. Peter Gunn's 1964 biography of her is virtually silent on the question of her sexuality. He comments that 'any emotional contact she had with others was through women, and the repeated failure of these relationships' — in particular with Mary Robinson [Mme Duclaux] and Kit Anstruther Thomson — left her prey to 'neuresthenia and isolation'.²⁵ Gunn wrote his biography with the co-operation of Lee's friends, and may have decided to veil any lesbian identification with code words. Her other biographer, on the other hand, Burdett Gardner in *The Lesbian Imagination (Victorian Style)*, assumed that Lee was lesbian from the moment he read her short story 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady', first published in *The Yellow Book* in 1896. And he associates her lesbianism with the decadence which brought *The Yellow Book* into disrepute:

The evidence of diseased sensibility is not to be found only in the perverse and brutal plot. The style is everywhere loaded with an unhealthy excess of jewelled ornament. ... [T]he narrative offers a series of occasions for the most elaborate virtuosity in the manipulation of sensory effects. There is an ironic contradiction between the story's theme and its manner; the protest against rococco artifice is expressed in a style bedecked in ormolu.²⁶

He suggests that the story projects 'some phase of Vernon Lee's life' (Gardner, 25), and that it is a 'fantastic allegory' of 'Vernon Lee's own sexual inversion..., her own personal struggle to achieve "freedom" and mental health' (Gardner, 28).

This is a large claim for one short story, but Gardner goes on to collect evidence from interviews with Lee's friends, acquaintances and enemies, and from published sources which mention her, in support of his assertion that she was a lesbian in inclination, if not in deed. Bertrand Russell for one casts her as a lesbian vampire: 'She was a woman of unbelievable ugliness, and probably never aroused desire in any man. She had a whole series of young girls to whom she was a vampire, and when one of them had been used up, she would throw her away and get another. She sapped their life and their energy' (Gardner, 60). And Bernard Berenson — who was personally very hostile to Lee following an incident of alleged plagiarism in 1898 — told Gardner that Lee had three interests in life: 'writing, pumping people ...[and] her love affairs with lady friends' (Gardner, 61). Her female friends, Ethel Smyth, the composer, and

Irene Cooper-Willis, who shared Lee's house in the late twenties and thirties, concur that Lee's preference was for women, but also that she was obsessively anxious to avoid physical contact with anyone, and that she was remarkably prudish, which suggests that Lee's sexuality never sought physical expression (Gardner, 85).

The matrix of sex, gender, sexuality and decadence in the case of Vernon Lee is interesting because it acts as a test case for the theories of decadence that this study seeks to substantiate. Gardner's claim that her story in *The Yellow Book* is decadent seems irrefutable. Moreover, it is not the only story with decadent credentials that she published, and a credible argument could be mounted that all her published fiction is decadent. Almost all her short fiction (she published only one novel that gained critical notice) consists of ghost stories, hauntings, tales of the supernatural in which decadent elements of style and subject in general, and perverse sexuality in particular, are to the fore. Gunn comments that her stories are all about love, but that love is never satisfactory because Lee could not 'fuse the erotic element with affections and emotions,'²⁷ as if she were incapable of imagining an erotic consummation. The decadence of these stories, that is, like the decadence of Wilde's and Symonds's poetic personae, is partly a function of their disruption of ideological norms of masculinity and femininity. And Lee certainly played out some of these disruptions in her life, with her aggressive adoption of a masculine pseudonym (which she used in both private and public), in a tailored masculine style of dress, and in the cultivation of a 'masculine' intellect. But she was not called decadent by her contemporaries (except, interestingly, by Pater²⁸), and the chapter on Lee — on her stories, and on her aesthetic theories — examines both her decadence and the reasons why her contemporaries did not call her decadent.

The *fin-de-siècle* figure who is only obliquely present in this study is the New Woman, the term probably first coined by Sarah Grand to describe 'a type of well-educated middle-class woman who was openly critical of the traditional roles established for women, especially marriage and motherhood and who was influenced by the feminist movement to speak out in favor of equal education for women and equal

purity for men and women.²⁹ She is only a qualified presence for a number of reasons. Late-nineteenth-century commentators, as Sally Ledger, Ann Ardis, Linda Dowling and Teresa Mangum have all suggested, associated the (male) decadent with New Woman because both called into question established gender roles. As Sally Ledger argues: 'It is no coincidence that New Woman materialized alongside the decadent and the dandy. Whilst the New Woman was perceived as a direct threat to classic Victorian definitions of femininity, the decadent and the dandy undermined the Victorian valorization of a robust muscular breed of British masculinity deemed to be crucial to the maintenance of the British Empire.'³⁰ One correlative of this was that 'anti-feminist fictional discourse frequently constructed [the New Woman] as a sexual decadent' (Ledger, 23). Despite this link however, the New Women writers of the Nineties (for example, Sarah Grand, George Egerton, Iota, Emma Frances Brooke, Menie Muriel Dowie, Olive Schreiner) tended to view their art as political and transitive; they expected or hoped that their examinations of questions of gender relations would have actual effects beyond the text in the real world. The origins of their art can be discerned in the feminist and suffrage movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These explicitly political origins, and in particular the purposive view of art and literature which the New Woman novelists espoused, are at odds with the functions and features that will be ascribed to decadence here; this study seeks to avoid 'collapsing all writers who raised questions about gender and sexuality' under the general rubric of decadence, and therefore does not examine the question of New Woman fiction or New Woman writers in detail.³¹

In order to discuss the sexual politics of decadence, it is first necessary to define the term. Chapters One and Two attempt the process of definition. The first chapter deals briefly with the critical heritage of the nineteenth century in art and literary criticism, focusing on the inheritance of a critique which often collapsed text and author into each other. The second chapter is a survey of the word 'decadence' and its usage — the inherited usage of the term from French criticism and culture, and its English adaptations in the 1890s. The chapter seeks to establish the problem of a creative

indeterminacy in decadence as critical term, as well as the gendered implications of its usage.

Thereafter, chapters focus on individual authors. Chapter Three, “‘Style not Sincerity’: Wilde’s Early Poetry,” discusses Wilde’s volume of *Poems*, first published in 1881, paying particular attention to their textual organization as a marker of their gender subversion. The ideals of the English gentleman and of Victorian masculinity are the context and theoretical framework for the contemporary perception of Wilde as insincere, unmanly, and unoriginal. The chapter particularly considers the meaning of ‘unmanly’ as a critical term, and as a marker of decadent potential in the text. In a close scrutiny of Wilde’s poem ‘Charmides’, the questions of imagery, transgressive form and theme are read both as symptomatic of the decadent appeal to the senses which so enraged contemporary reviewers and as evidence of the sexual-political nature of decadence. Chapter Four, ‘Learning the Poetics of Restraint’, examines the poetry Wilde published immediately before and after his conviction for gross indecency in 1895. The chapter posits the theory that, following his imprisonment, Wilde knew that he had to seek alternative modes of self-expression from those he had previously chosen. His poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is an attempt to regain his cultural status as a writer of importance in the light of lessons about how same-sex passion could (or could not) be expressed that Wilde had learned both from his own circumstances, and from the poetry of A. E. Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad*. ‘The Ballad’ is perhaps an attempt to regain the ‘moral high ground’³² of sincerity rather than style, and to recover a claim for moral health over the decadent degeneration of which he had been accused, convicted and punished.

In Chapter Five, ‘The Decadent Critic as Artist’, the study turns to the works of Arthur Symonds. This chapter discusses his theoretical interventions into the definition of decadence, and shows through close readings of some of his 1905 collection of short stories, *Spiritual Adventures*, how Symonds envisaged the practicalities of decadent life and art. The stories demonstrate the extent to which a focus on the ‘moment’, on the transience of experience, and on the valorization of art over life feminizes the male

protagonists, rendering them fatally incapable of decisive action, whilst at the same time, female characters are hardened because of the exposure of the fact that their femininity is only a shell or disguise. Whilst the men become more effeminate, the women develop masculine traits in order to survive. Chapters Six and Seven, 'Learning the Poetics of Decadence' and 'Telling the Dancer from the Dance' are concerned with Symons's 1890s' poetry and his move from the dramatic monologue in the style of Browning to impressionist and decadent lyrics about actresses, dancers and street girls. In these poems, Symons appears as a hyper-masculine, hyper-virile figure, who exposes gender ideology by laying bare its assumptions. The poems are not, however, simply a salacious catalogue of sexual conquest. The poetic persona is a *voyeur* as well as an actor of passion; and whilst the way he looks at the women he admires may be uncomfortable to say the least, his persona is also a frank admirer of the female artistry he observes; he takes pleasure from the artistic autonomy of the dancer. His attitude is rarely pure and never simple: for when the hyper-virile poet becomes a *voyeur*, he is a passive (that is, feminized) observer, and the woman who is watched becomes in turn active and empowered in a decadent reversal of gender hierarchy.

Chapter Eight, 'Vernon Lee: Decadent Woman?', begins with a discussion of whether it is possible for the woman artist in general to be ascribed decadent characteristics, and it then moves to the particular question of the place of Vernon Lee in the decadent schema. It examines the ways in which she, like Wilde and Symons, subverted dominant gender categories. Turning from the life to the works, this chapter examines a number of short stories by Vernon Lee, tales of ghost and androgynes, through the lens of Terry Castle's theories of lesbian ghosts and lesbian bodies put forward in her book, *The Apparitional Lesbian*. The chapter argues that the themes of these stories are self-consciously decadent because — perhaps rather less self-consciously — they subvert dominant ideas of gender in their phantoms of illicit desire.

Notes

¹ *Punch*, 26 November, 1891, p. 147.

² Sally Ledger, 'The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism', in Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (eds), *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 22-44, p. 22

³ Alison Hennegan, 'Personalities and Principles: Aspects of Life and Literature in *fin-de-siècle* England' in Mikulas Teich and Roy Porter (eds), *Fin de Siècle and its Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 190-191.

⁴ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), p. 9

⁵ *Punch*, 27 April, 1895, p. 203

⁶ The words are those of James Forsyte, a character in John Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga*, published between 1906 and 1921. James is very relieved, in the light of the difficulties his son has with the beautiful Irene, that he married his wife before the enactment of the 1882 Married Women's Property Act, which came into force in 1883. See John Galsworthy, *The Forsyte Saga*, Volume 2, *In Chancery* [1920] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 607.

⁷ Mary Poovey uses this phrase in two slightly different ways, which are relevant to this study too. She writes: 'In one sense it means "the work of ideology": representations of gender at midcentury were part of the system of interdependent images in which various ideologies became accessible to individual men and women. In another sense, however, the phrase means "the work of making ideology": representations of gender constituted one of the sites on which ideological systems were simultaneously constructed and contested.' See Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989), p. 2.

⁸ See Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

⁹ Lee Halcombe, 'Victorian Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law, 1857-1882,' in Martha Vicinus (ed.), *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (London: Methuen and Co., 1980), pp. 3-28, pp. 24-25.

¹⁰ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 97.

¹¹ Kermode comments that the sense of an ending is 'known for a myth.' But he also suggests that the end of the nineteenth century is a defensible myth, in the sense that many other endings corresponded with the century's end. 'In 1900 Nietzsche died; Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*; 1900 was the date of Husserl's *Logic*, and of Russell's *Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*. With an exquisite sense of timing Planck published his quantum hypothesis in the very last days of the century, December, 1900.' *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 97.

¹² Ian Fletcher, 'Decadence and the Little Magazines,' in Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (eds), *Decadence and the 1890s*, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, 17 (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), pp. 174-206, p. 175.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 158.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1987), p. 63.

¹⁵ Diana Fuss (ed.), *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 5.

¹⁶ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 46.

¹⁷ See Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 79. The rather scanty remains of Vernon Lee's correspondance with Pater are documented in Lawrence Evans (ed.) *The Letters of Walter Pater* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970).

¹⁸ See Karl Beckson, *Arthur Symonds, a Life* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 25, 34. One of Symonds's last published works was *A Study of Walter Pater*, published in 1932 by Charles Sawyer, indicating that Pater's influence on Symonds lasted for the whole of his life.

¹⁹ See Neil Bartlett, *Who Was that Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1989), p. 26; and Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence, Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1991).

²⁰ See Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Oscar Wilde, Effeminacy and the Queer Moment* (London: Cassell, 1994); James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Manhood* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Joseph Bristow, *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing After 1885* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995).

²¹ *Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 194.

²² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1985), p. 222, n. 8.

²³ Critics have not agreed about the extent to which Symons's adoption of the word Symbolism in preference to Decadence after 1895 was a merely pragmatic gesture at a cultural and historical moment of crisis for decadence, or whether it marked a real shift in the grounds of his aesthetic theory. Murray H. Pittock in *Spectrum of Decadence: The Literature of the 1890s* (London: Routledge, 1993) says: 'Commentators on the Nineties sometimes appear to assume that Symons's diminution of Decadence as a mere prelude to Symbolism was a considered judgement. ... In fact, the terms used by Symons to discuss Symbolism are often close to those he had earlier used to define Decadence in his famous article "The Decadent Movement in Literature." ... Symons's abandonment of the idea of Decadence was a purely nominal apostasy.' (Pittock, pp. 70-71) See also Anna Balakian, *The Symbolist Movement, A Critical Reappraisal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967). Balakian comments: 'If, at a certain point in the development of the movement, critics were justified in separating "symbolist" from "decadent", everything points to the fact that in the last ten years of the century, the two became so intertwined that without the "decadent" spirit, there would be little left to distinguish Symbolism from Romanticism.' (p. 115). It seems likely that the real distinction between the two terms was one of reception. Where decadence implied something slightly *outré*, symbolism emphasizes implications of the sacred rather than the profane, meaning that it was easier to 'get away with' a symbolist doctrine than it was to make decadence acceptable. Moreover, decadence, once it becomes acceptable, loses its force.

²⁴ Arthur Symons, 'Stella Maris', *London Nights* [1895] in *Poems: Volume One* (London: Martin Secker, 1924), p. 203.

²⁵ Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee*, p. 98.

²⁶ Burdett Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination (Victorian Style): A Psychological and Critical Study of 'Vernon Lee'* (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1987), p. 21. This book is the publication of a 1952 doctoral thesis, and, as such, the views about lesbianism expressed in it are problematic, since Gardner insists on seeing the lesbian in narrowly Freudian terms as a psychopathological case.

²⁷ Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee*, p. 98.

²⁸ I have come across only one reference to Vernon Lee as a decadent writer, and that example is highly qualified. The reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 5 August, 1887, 5, reviewing Lee's recently published *Juvenilia*, noted that her work sang 'the "sad story of humanity"' and brought 'something like a touch of Puritanism' to what is 'sometimes a decadent art.' The review is unsigned, but is identified in in Carl Markgraf's annotated bibliography of works about Lee as being by Pater. See Carl Markgraf, "'Vernon Lee': A Commentary and Annotated Bibliography of Writings About Her', *English Literature in Transition*, 26 (1983), 268-312.

²⁹ Carol A. Senf, Introduction to Sarah Grand, *The Heavenly Twins* [1893] (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. xiii.

³⁰ Sally Ledger, 'The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism', p. 22; Ann Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Teresa Mangum, 'Style Wars of the 1890s: The New Woman and the Decadent,' in Nikki Lee Manos and Meri-Jane Rochelson (eds), *Transforming Genres: New Approaches to British Fiction of the 1890s* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); Linda Dowling, 'The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890s,' *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 33 (1979), 434-453.

³¹ Teresa Mangum, 'Style Wars of the 1890s: The New Woman and the Decadent', p. 50.

³² For a development of the argument about moral high and low ground and their relationship to sincerity and style, see Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, pp. 14-17.

Chapter One: Traditions of Nineteenth-Century Criticism

In the late nineteenth century, the definition of decadence depended on where the critic stood in relation to the term — it was hurled back and forth, as Arthur Symons noted, as a term of defiance and a term of abuse. In twentieth-century criticism there are three basic schools of defining decadence, each predicated on different assumptions about the grounds and role of criticism. The first takes Symons's statements that decadence is purely a matter of form, from *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, literally, and insists on seeing the phenomenon as merely a matter of style. The second school of thought goes in quite the opposite direction, and takes the view that decadence depends on personality, or even on personification. It is in the artist and not the text that decadence is to be found. The third view is that any definition of decadence is dependent on the *attitude* in the materials presented, which may be characterised simply as defiance of conventional pieties, or alternatively may be dignified as a philosophy. These positions might be summed up as the textual emphasis, the (implied) biographical emphasis; and the philosophical emphasis. Of the three, the most respectable in contemporary theory is the textual, drawing its force from the insistence that there is nothing outside the text which informs formalist, new critical, structuralist and post-structuralist theories of literature. But there is no *cordon sanitaire* between them. Like the word which each position might seek to define, the limits of each approach are frequently transgressed; textual analysis, biographical or philosophical critique, merge into each other, producing long lists of possible attributes to be included in any definition of decadence, lists which overspill reasonable limits, and which suggest that decadence can mean almost anything. Decadence is, that is, certainly a polymorphous term, and possibly a perverse one. And for all the suggestions that it is characterised by *ennui* and languid world-weariness, it has an impressive transgressive energy.

In a 1974 essay in *Language and Style*, Gayatri Spivak argued that decadence should be used only as a literary label, referring to specific linguistic practices which she identifies as the 'literariness' of language. The word should not be tied down to particular literary-historical periods: decadence might occur at any time. She deplores the lack of a firm definition of decadence within the parameters of linguistic praxis:

What explanations exist are often sociological, presenting decadence in terms of the abdication of social commitment after 1848 and 1871: the writers and critics ... speak also of the negative decadence in art's form and content; they draw historically inaccurate but enthusiastic analogies with the literature of the Roman decadence. These explanations ... [collect] ... the data of literary practice as a type of social practice from which broad generalisations about the ambience of movements may be drawn.¹

Spivak's objection is to the ways in which decadence is a term applied indiscriminately not only to the form and content of literature, but also to the contexts of literary practice. The definition of the word has gone beyond the scope of the text: it is read instead as a sociological, a psychological (or psycho-biographical) and an historical phenomenon. Spivak argues that for decadence to be a usable term, its definition must be based only on the text, on its 'literariness', on its textual features alone. The critic must concern him/herself with the analysis of how 'language deliberately displays those characteristics and discontinuities that a commonsensical confidence in verbal retrieval ignores' (Spivak, p. 228). This emphasis on literariness is directly descended from the writings of the Russian Formalists, by way of Structuralism. And Spivak's conclusion is that decadence should be used only for descriptions of textual features. The term, she says, must be preserved, but preserved 'cleansed of normative shadings' (Spivak, p. 233).

This argument is problematic on a number of levels. It is difficult to envisage how any concept of literariness, based as it must be on the disjuncture between everyday language in non-literary usage and the language of literary texts, can be 'cleansed of normative shadings.' If decadence is to be understood as specific, exaggerated mode of literariness, how is it possible to analyse its features without invoking the binaries of normal and abnormal when defining it? Spivak hopes to limit

the normative shadings to language alone, but it is not possible to do without them entirely.

Spivak's article is the most absolutist example of the textual emphasis in defining decadence that I have come across. Where other critics depend on linguistic features for definition, they do so with other contexts also in mind. Linda Dowling's *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* argues a thorough case that 'Decadence ... emerged from a linguistic crisis, a crisis in Victorian attitudes towards language.'² But her argument places decadence within contexts of national culture and its relationship to national language: she suggests that there is an ideological loading in the invocation of English as a national language, and therefore what is *in* the text is obviously (though not transparently) related to what the world outside the text. Dowling's version of decadence is a sophisticated exploration of a complex matrix of linguistics, literary and cultural politics and production and ideology. Other commentators, in this century and the last, are not so subtle. As Russell M. Goldfarb has suggested: 'There is a sharp distinction between decadence as a popular and as a literary term.'³ But the demarcation line of that distinction is not clearly fixed. Goldfarb argues that the word is contaminated by the failure to distinguish rigorously between its popular and literary uses. The contamination arises because, in the late nineteenth century, the word was defined by three distinct groups: the writers in mainstream periodicals, who generally regarded it as an occasion for the expression of moral indignation; the writers of skits and parodies — writers such Max Beerbohm, Robert Hichens, or John Davidson — who 'concerned themselves with exploiting popular ideas about whatever quality of decadence best suited their purpose' (Goldfarb, p. 370); and the relatively rare group of writers for whom decadence was a positive literary term. It is the latter group with whom the critic should be most concerned, he argues, before going on to provide his own definition of what the serious critics meant by the word. Features include the value of experience, indulgence and sensation, regardless of morality; a concern for the morbid, the perverse, the sordid, the artificial; unnatural beauty; paradoxical reversals of values; 'a self-conscious and weary contempt for social

conventions such as truth and marriage'; and the acceptance of 'Beauty' as life's supreme standard (Goldfarb, p. 373).

What becomes clear as one examines a number twentieth-century of attempts to define decadence is that there is no simple synonym. Decadence is almost always defined by a list. The lists vary, and are not always self-consistent. As Claude de L. Ryals puts it, 'Decadence undertakes not only to mix unlikely elements; it also seeks to mix them in ever more unlikely proportions.'⁴ For Ryals, then, decadence is to be found in imbalance or distortion of natural proportion. It is an outgrowth of Romanticism, as Graham Hough also argued, in *The Last Romantics*.⁵ It focuses on the grotesque rather than the natural (Ryals, p. 87); it is 'a feminine sensibility characterised by a withdrawal from masculine reality'; it is deliberation rather than spontaneity, complexity rather than simplicity; it exhibits arrogance and *hubris*, *ennui* and world-weariness (Ryals, p. 91). For Edmund Wilson, it is a 'reaction against Victorian Christianity by people who were still Victorians and Christians',⁶ implying an attitude rather than a textual practice. For R. K. R. Thornton, 'the decadent is a man caught between two opposite and apparently incompatible pulls; on the one hand, he is drawn by the world, its necessities and the attractive impressions he derives from it, while on the other hand, he yearns towards the eternal, the ideal and the unworldly'.⁷ Thornton's position is one in which art and life are both implicit in the definition of decadence.

From these few scattered examples, it is clear that decadence resists simple definitions, and that the emphasis oscillates between the decadent text and the decadent writer, and the boundary between life and art is rendered infinitely permeable. There even exist definitions in which decadence is understood primarily as a matter of personification. For Thomas Reed Whissen, it is easier to understand the word if you give it a human face.

I see a decadent as something of a Beau Brummel, impeccably dressed, with worldly good looks, a sardonic smile and a devastating wit; a charming skeptic, fighting vainly with the old ennui, adrift in a world he finds increasingly unmannered and vulgar, a world devoted to spiteful egalitarianism, torn by petty rivalries, awash in nasty hypocrisies: in short, a world in which he can survive only if he keeps his distance.⁸

And for Richard Gilman, decadence 'has clear lineaments: hooded eyelids and sardonic mouth, slender nervous fingers, and perhaps even a voice, one with a throaty, brandied sort of timbre'.⁹

Pure personification is not very helpful in the definition of the literary usage of decadence. But these images of decadent men are symptomatic of the ways in which the word is understood — as a behaviour and an attitude as well as a mode of writing. Moreover, the personifications are distinctly male, if not quite masculine or virile. The decadent woman seems virtually unimaginable, even if decadence exhibits an effeminate sensibility. The fact that strictly textual approaches are so rare in discussions of decadence is very important. It implies the transgressive energy of the term. But, as the next section suggests, it is also a function of the critical heritage of the nineteenth century, of the ways in which the literary text and artistic product were viewed not as pure artefacts, existing for their own sake, but as part of a complex social matrix in which text, personality, culture and nation all fed upon each other.

Traditions of Criticism in the Nineteenth Century

When the critical commentators of the nineteenth century used the word decadence to describe literary practice, their frame of reference was not strictly confined to the literary work in its own right. Rather, they were also involved in a description of the content of decadent art and literature, the style in which the text was written, and, moreover, the lifestyle and moral standards of the artist in as much as such issues could be intuited from the text, or gleaned from other sources. Throughout the nineteenth century, that is, the frame of reference for literary criticism was one in which there was a strongly implied homology between the writer and his/her text. Wordsworth, writing in the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, argued: 'Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.'¹⁰ He claims that the quality of the work produced is an index of the qualities of its producer; and this

qualitative link between text and writer was to remain continually in the minds of critics in nineteenth-century criticism. In his 1833 essay, 'What is Poetry?', itself explicitly modelled on Wordsworth's views, John Stuart Mill suggested that as 'the truth of poetry is to paint the human soul truly', the best poetry was naturally produced by those who were most in touch with the spiritual aspects of themselves, who had, as it were, the most soul to express:

Great poets are often proverbially ignorant of life. What they know has come by observation of themselves: they have found within them one highly delicate specimen of human nature, on which the laws of emotion are written in large characters, such as can be read off without much study.¹¹

The great poet, according to Mill, is a man of extraordinary intellect, and yet, a man whose ideas are easily accessible and simple. Whilst the poet may be temperamentally separate from the exigencies of everyday life, and should, in Mill's view, be shielded in particular from the world of commerce, he is able nonetheless to communicate universal truths to other men because he has found them in himself. The truths he tells can be 'read off without much study', implying that they are clearly written in the great man's soul, and clearly written into the poetry he writes: clarity of expression is thus an implicit standard in great poetry. The poet is also a man: in Wordsworth's words, a 'man speaking to men', which further suggests that poetry ideally communicates to a community of like-minded (though less gifted) men, who are both like and unlike the poet himself.

Added into this equation of the quality of the poet as man and the quality of his work, another locus of critical judgement was the choice of subject matter which had an important place in the nexus of literary meaning and morality. The subject matter of art and literature was read as ^{an} indication of the moral and intellectual status of the artist. The writer who most insisted on subject as an indication of high moral standing (or, indeed, of immorality) was John Ruskin. In Volume Three of *Modern Painters* (1856), he wrote: 'the greatness or smallness of a man is in the most conclusive sense determined for him at his birth.' Whilst education and other influences might have effects on character, they can never make a great man from one who is born 'small.'

Greatness in art can never be taught because art is ‘eminently and finally the expression of the spirits of great men.’ It is a matter of character. All that education can do is to encourage the artist to be honest and intelligible in his practice, and to endeavour ‘to lead him, throughout life, to prefer openness to affectation, realities to shadows, and beauty to corruption.’¹² The evidence of greatness according to Ruskin — the most reliable and accessible indicator of its presence — is in the artist’s choice of subject matter. He argues that ‘he who represents brutalities and vices (for delight in them and not for rebuke of them) [is] of no rank at all, or rather of a negative rank, holding a certain order in the abyss.’¹³ The link between the moral temperament of the artist and the greatness of his art is absolutely explicit, and is always detectable:

what goodness we can conceive to arise in the companies of men, from chastity of thought, regularity of life, simplicity of custom, and balance of authority; precisely that kind of goodness and greatness may be given to a picture by the purity of its colour, the severity of its forms, and the symmetry of its masses. ... There is no moral vice, no moral virtue, which has not its *precise* prototype in the art of painting; so that you may at your will, illustrate the moral habit by the art, or the art by the moral habit.¹⁴

There can be no clearer statement of the relation of the artist to his work, and by extension, of the writer to his text. In a further comment from *Modern Painters*, Ruskin also establishes that the morality of which the artist is both representative and guardian is a social and sexual morality.

All great art is delicate art, and all coarse art is bad art. Nay, even to a certain extent, all *bold* art is bad art, for boldness is not the proper word to apply to the courage and swiftness of a great master, based on knowledge and coupled with fear and love. There is as much difference between the boldness of true and false masters, as there is between the courage of a sure woman and the shamelessness of a lost one.¹⁵

Boldness and coarseness in art are implicitly linked with the immorality of the lost or fallen woman. And Ruskin is sure that one can always tell the difference between these binaries of great art and bad art, delicacy and coarseness, courage and boldness, the sure woman and the shameless one, though he does not tell his reader how to be sure. In that figurative allusion to the fallen woman, however, he makes it clear that the moralities of which his ideal artist figure is the guardian are sexual and social.

In *Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams argues that: 'an essential hypothesis in the development of the idea of culture is that the art of a period is closely and necessarily related to the generally prevalent "way of life", and further, that in consequence, aesthetic, moral and social judgements are closely interrelated.' This hypothesis is 'a product of the intellectual history of the nineteenth century.'¹⁶ Although, that is, the poet lived out of the sphere of public life, he remained, nonetheless, a 'man speaking to men'. He reflected the world of which and in which he wrote or painted back to that world, despite (or even because of) the distance he maintained between his artistic temperament and the world whose operations he re-inscribed. As a 'man speaking to men', he re-presented the community of his audience back to itself, and was himself a representative member of that community. As Ruskin also argued, the communal function of the artist had national importance. 'The art of any country is the exponent of its social and political virtues. The art or general productive and formative energy of any country is an exact exponent of its ethical life. You can have noble art only from noble persons, associated under laws fitted to their time and circumstance.'¹⁷ The artist, that is, cannot separate himself from his place in the nation. He is not merely a creative voice speaking in a social vacuum. He also has a social function, reflecting the age and the nation back to itself, showing via the medium of his creative temperament the face of the community back to that community. In this formula, art and life exist in an uneasy symbiosis in which the life of the individual, as it is registered through his artistic practice, is an indication of the life of the whole group to which the artist belongs; and for preference, he should be showing that his cultural community is productive, socially cohesive, stable, moral and strong. Such values are the core values of mid-century masculinity: the art of the nation is resolutely associated with the shared values of its men.

The emphasis is very much on community, and implicitly on a specifically middle-class community. As E. J. Hobsbawm suggests, 'increasingly ... the middle classes were identified not so much as individuals who "counted" as such, but by collective recognition signs: by the education they had received, the places they lived in,

their lifestyles and practices.’ The values of such a group tend towards conventionality: the aim is to uphold social cohesion and stability.¹⁸ And the aim of a culture which reflects the ‘prevalent “way of life”’ is to reflect such cohesion and stability. An art predicated, in Matthew Arnold’s words on ‘separate thoughts and images,’ is to be feared, since what it reflects is disintegration; it speaks of the potential for decline in the political as well as the cultural strength of the nation. The nation produces the artist, and the artist reflects a (probably idealised) version, filtered through his artistic temperament, of what the nation has produced back to the nation. Wordsworth, for example, had sought in his art a haven from the ‘degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation’ which he saw in life in the city.¹⁹ He writes of an escape to the ideal locus of the countryside. As such, his poetry reassured its readers that the ideals of social stability existed, albeit not in the here and now of the city; the ideals of which he wrote were still, however, shared, communal ideals. Matthew Arnold also desired such an escape through poetry and art: but he put his fears of ‘this strange disease of modern life, / With its sick hurry, its divided aims, / Its heads o’er-taxed, its palsied hearts,’ *into* the poetry he wrote.²⁰ He reflected not a stable communal ideal, but a reality from which not even art could offer a reliable escape. Arnold’s ideals in art and criticism — that the artist should ‘see life steadily and see it whole’,²¹ and that he should pursue ‘sweetness and light’²² — are ideals for which he feels himself to be temperamentally unsuited, and which he could not write into his poetry, despite the fact that they inform his own critical writings, and were indeed immensely influential in forming the ideas of other nineteenth-century critics. In a letter to his sister, Mrs Forster, written some time in July, 1849, Arnold wrote:

Fret not yourself to make my poems square in all their parts, but like what you can my darling. The true reason why parts [of my poems] suit you while others do not is that my poems are fragments — i.e. that I am fragments, while you are whole; the whole effect of my poems is quite vague and indeterminate — this is their weakness; ... a person who has any inward completeness can at best like only parts of them; in fact such a person stands firmly and knows what he is about while the poems stagger weakly and are at their wits’ end.²³

His remarks, confessing as they do, Arnold's sense of his personal and poetic inadequacy, again establish a qualitative homology between writer and text which was so often at the heart of the critical writing of his age.²⁴

Arnold also saw any willingness in his audience to accept 'parts' instead of a whole or total picture as symptomatic not only of his own personal and poetic failure, but also of the failure of his audience, and, by extension, the age and culture in which he and they lived. If poetry and art reflect the community from which they are written, then the willingness of readers and viewers to accept suggestive fragments indicates a community in decline from the ideal of seeing life steadily and whole. Writing in 1853, in the 'Preface' to the first edition of his *Poems*, he complained of contemporary poetry and criticism:

We have poems which seem to exist for the sake of single lines and passages, not for the sake of producing any total impression. We have critics who seem to direct their attention merely to detached expressions, to the language about the action, not the action itself. ... They will permit the poet to select any action he pleases, and suffer that action to go as it will, provided he gratifies them with occasional bursts of fine writing and with a shower of isolated thoughts and images.²⁵

This contrasts with Greek poetry and criticism. The Greeks 'regarded the whole; we regard the parts. With them the action predominated over the expression of it; with us, the expression predominates over the action.'²⁶ Not only does the work reveal the quality of the artist as a man, but disintegrated forms such as contemporary culture has begun to throw up imply a cultural decline where audiences are prepared to accept a less than ideal art. An attack is implied on the cultural and moral health of the nation which derives at once from the aberrant individual artist, and the aberrant audience which the artist at once reflects and creates.

This relationship between language, literature, culture and nationhood is traced in detail in Linda Dowling's book, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*. Dowling shows how Coleridge's writings had developed the concept of English literary language as a *lingua communis*, which emphasised the 'identity of a nation and its literature' in a direct response to Wordsworth's ideal of poetry as the language of men in ordinary life. The text/writer homology, that is, developed

alongside an homology of literature and nationality as a central tenet of Victorian literary criticism. In Dowling's argument, the *lingua communis* corresponds approximately to the Structuralist concept of *langue* (the language system as a whole); but it adds to it an ideological loading in which a nation's language defines its entire culture. In contrast, the specific instances of ordinary speech favoured by Wordsworth as a poetic ideal are a virtual equivalent for the Structuralist *parole* (or individual instances of utterance).

Dowling argues that there were inherent tensions in both Wordsworth's insistence on the individual man speaking to men, and in Coleridge's *lingua communis*. To take Wordsworth's position was to risk an unstable sense of national identity if culture and nation developed side by side: specific instances of everyday speech in ordinary life are subject to the fluctuations produced by those speakers and by historical change. Wordsworth's poetic model led, that is, to the instability of the idelect, that form of language only spoken by *one* man. Instability in language is undesirable if language is supposed to carry the weight of the nation's identification of itself: stable communal values cannot be founded on such shifting sands. On the other hand, Coleridge's *lingua communis*, adopted by Arnold for his conception of culture, is also problematic, particularly because nineteenth-century philologists and linguists had posited that the language system was not itself perfect or perfectible, but was constantly changing because the rules of the system were governed by usage, and were not therefore part of any fixed system. The German philologists, Dowling argues,

insisted that language treated independently of its individual speakers was a dangerously misleading abstraction. Thus language could not be a *Volksstimme* expressing the *Volksgeist*; and thus both the English language and the 'English National Character' which Coleridgians assumed it expressed, were no more than vague and nostalgic abstractions — like Coleridge's *lingua communis*, spoken of everywhere, but existing nowhere.²⁷

The implication of this conclusion was that any connection between language, literature, culture, selfhood and nationhood had to be forged by an act of faith. Either that, or it had to be accepted that such connections did not exist; and that therefore there was no requirement to try to make them exist in cultural production. Dowling, insisting on the linguistic provenance of the concept of decadence, suggests that the convulsion caused

by the separation of language from culture, selfhood and nation, is a causal factor in the emergence of literary decadence.

Arnold's critique was particularly influential because it so clearly stated that there was indeed a relationship between cultural forms and political reality: artistic fragmentation is closely aligned with social fragmentation. He tried to enunciate the faith which Dowling suggests had been damaged by linguistic theory. Arnold wrote not only on literary texts, but on educational matters and on the role of the church in the national identity. His writing is an exemplar of a standard of socially engaged criticism, which sees the work of culture as indistinguishable from the forging of national identity. This bringing together of text and writer, text and culture, text and nation as part of the produce of that nation is the implied standard critical position of the Victorian writer. Criticism is useful. It can, does, and should, have real effects in the world beyond the texts it analyses. There is, however, another path which cultural criticism might take: a path of withdrawal, a movement away from social engagement; a refusal to see criticism as an attempt to change the material conditions of ordinary life for the benefit of a wider cultural community; a movement inwards, towards introspection and, indeed, solipsism. This is the position which Dowling's argument posits as a response to new theories of language: but it is also a position with profound social implications both for the implied standards of criticism, and for the implied relationship between cultural production and nationhood.

In short, one might identify two opposing strands in critical thought: engagement with the world beyond the text; withdrawal from the world beyond the text. These are not precisely opposing responses, however. If Arnold represented the former, Walter Pater represented the latter. But Pater was not Arnold's binary opposite. His early writings insist more on the quality of temperament in the critic and the artist than they do on the transitive function of a politically engaged critique. Yet, to the extent that Pater, like many of his predecessors, including Arnold and Ruskin, concentrated on temperament and personality as a starting point in his criticism, he shared in the Victorian post-Romantic critical heritage.²⁸ In his writings, however, the

identification of the artist with his work is not an absolute homology. Rather it is a stimulus to curiosity about the precise nature of the relationship between text and writer, artist and artefact: it is a question of a creative and critical ambiguity, which provokes speculation, but does not necessarily provide his audience with totalising answers. In *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), in the chapter on 'Luca della Robbia,' Pater specifically accords value to the ambiguities of the art and lives of the fifteenth-century Italian sculptors, and he emphasises the gaps in knowledge about them:

One longs to penetrate into the lives of the men who have given expression to so much power and sweetness; but it is part of the reserve, the austere dignity and simplicity of their existence, that their histories are for the most part lost or told but briefly: from their lives, as from their work, all tumult of sound and colour has passed away. ... [O]ne asks in vain for more than a shadowy outline of their actual days.²⁹

It is almost as if the fact that these artists' lives have been lost was a deliberate artistic strategy engineered by the artists themselves. Pater praises the 'incompleteness' of, for example, Luca della Robbia's sculpture and the 'expression' of Michelangelo's poetry; in his critique that which is most transient is also of most value (Pater, ed. Hill, p. 53, p. 56, 1873 text).

Pater, that is, both uses and subverts the artist/text homology. He is curious about the possibility of identifying the artist with his work; but he values only the faintest of identifications: there must be enough information to stimulate the creative curiosity of the viewer or critic; but never so much information that narrow moral definitions of the artistic personality are allowed to explain the work. Moreover, Pater rejected the universal — the communal standard — as his ideal in art. The complete transcendence of individuality into the universal in art, were such a thing possible, was for Pater to risk loss of 'expression'. His ideal is a shifting one, and is to be found in many different places. One example is in the poetry of Michelangelo, to which a chapter of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* was dedicated. This chapter, which first appeared as an essay in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1871, was adapted in the first edition of *The Renaissance* to include, in a footnote, translations by John Addington Symonds of a number of Michelangelo's sonnets. The selected sonnets are

addressed to Vittoria Colonna, Tommaso Cavalieri and 'To Night': they have, that is, male, female and abstract addressees:³⁰ all human and artistic life is there, one might say. It would appear that it was the male addressee which drew Pater to the sonnets: and in his commentary on them, there is an element of the homoerotic.

We know little of [Michelangelo's] youth, but all tends to make one believe in the vehemence of its passions. Beneath the Platonic calm of the sonnets there is latent a deep delight in carnal form and colour. ... [H]e often falls into the language of less tranquil affections. ... He who spoke so decisively of the imaginative world of the unveiled human form had not been always a mere Platonic lover. Vague and wayward his loves may have been; but they partook of the strength of his nature, and sometimes would by no means become music, so that the comely order of his days was quite put out. (Pater, ed. Hill, pp. 63-4, 1873 text)

Here again, art is an expression of personality. But the personality is not ideal, and the art it produces reflects that non-ideality. In Michelangelo, Pater sees the universal and the individual; but the two aspects of personality are not in perfect balance, and cannot always be expressed in the perfect musicality of art. For Arnold, this would have been a matter for lament. But for Pater, it is the elusiveness of balance which is admired. Again, ignorance of biography, a fragmented picture of personality, is an occasion for creative speculation. The speculation moves away from any socially engaged position, into a celebration of a temperament which, by the standards of social cohesion, is dangerous: it is guessed that Michelangelo acted on his passions, that his loves were 'vague and wayward'. In his focus on personality, Pater valorises not only the art work and the artist, but also the creative faculties of the viewer. Criticism loses its outward direction, and returns to the critic rather than his society for its values.

In *Modern Painters*, Ruskin had proclaimed: 'the greatest thing a human being ever does in this world is to *see* something and tell what it *saw* in a plain way.'³¹ He insists, that is, on clarity, both of vision and of expression. The implied standard is one of objectivity. For Arnold, the ideal was to 'see life steadily and to see it whole'; and it was also to 'see the object as in itself it really is'. Objectivity is again the standard to which criticism appeals; and clarity is to be preferred in expression, since one of the functions of criticism is to be socially as well as artistically useful: and for usefulness to accrue, criticism must be articulate and persuasive.

[Criticism] tends ... to make an intellectual situation of which the creative power can profitably avail itself. It tends to establish an order of ideas, if not absolutely true, yet true by comparison with that which it displaces; to make the best ideas prevail. Presently these new ideas reach society, the touch of truth is the touch of life, and there is a stir and growth everywhere; out of this stir and growth come the creative epochs of literature.³²

The standards of clarity, articulacy and objectivity spread out, in a ripple effect, from criticism to art, from art to society, from society to nation — and back again.

Pater, on the other hand, adapts freely from traditional criticism. He retains an interest in artistic temperament and its reflection in textual production: but he refuses to take such relationships to predetermined conclusions about society and nation. In the preface to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, he famously adapted Arnold's view of critical objectivity for his own purposes. "To see the object as in itself it really is," has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly' (Pater, ed. Hill, p. xix).³³ In this creative misquotation, Pater shifts the grounds of criticism from the objective to the subjective. He goes on, at the end of the book, in the Conclusion, to develop this view of the subjective.

Experience, already reduced to a swarm of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world. (Pater, ed. Hill, 187-188, 1873 text)

When perception is limited to fleeting impressions, it is impossible to see life steadily and whole. When personality is so thick a wall, it is impossible to see things objectively; it is impossible to speak of them objectively: and the existence of the world beyond the self is only a matter of faith or conjecture — so communication is not the necessary function of speech. Clarity of expression and vision are, in such circumstances, irrelevant. Pater's own language practice dramatises these issues: it defies paraphrase, easy analysis and assimilation. What his critique values, both in his manner of admiration, and in what he admires, is elusive, impressionistic, evasive.

In his essay on 'The School of Giorgione', added to the third edition of *The Renaissance* in 1888, Pater tells us that the function of aesthetic criticism is to 'estimate the degree to which a given work fulfils its responsibilities to its special material' (Pater, ed. Hill, p. 102, 1888 text).³⁴ The aesthetic critic must therefore concentrate his attention on the particularities of form rather than on a paraphrase of content. What a work says is irrelevant. And, since content is the first place in which a work's morality or immorality can be discerned, Pater's emphasis on form begins a process of revoking criticism's moral dimension. For Pater the ideal arts are those in which the distinction between matter and form is elusive. In poetry, the lyric is the ideal:

Lyrical poetry, precisely because in it we are least able to detach the matter from the form, without a deduction of something from the matter itself, is, at least artistically, the highest and most complete form of poetry. And the very perfection of such poetry often seems to depend ... on a certain suppression or vagueness of mere subject, so that the meaning reaches us through ways not distinctly traceable by the understanding. (Pater, ed. Hill, p. 108, 1888 text)

Pater's keywords in his discussion of artistic praxis are words which defy objective analysis and enact the evasiveness of the art he praises — words such as 'suppression', 'vagueness', 'transition', and 'delicacy'. To that list, Isobel Armstrong adds 'intense, fervent, sharp, enthusiasm, excitement, blitheness, sensuous form, penetrate, penetrative [and] unity' as 'keywords in the nervously subtle arpeggios of [Pater's] prose'.³⁵ The reader does not gain the information to judge the work's morality from such words. They defy logical analysis, and as such, Pater's writing can be seen as a creative subversion of contemporary critical norms.

The criticism of art and literature in the nineteenth century depended on a complex matrix of assumptions. The text was understood as expressive of the character of the man who wrote it: criticism had an implicit biographical sub-stratum. There was a mainstream standard, which sought to confirm the values of conventional morality through the scrutiny of textual content and the biography of its author. Criticism was supposed to serve a social or educative function which demanded that it should be objective and speak clearly. It also placed itself in terms of ideals of masculinity and nationhood — the viewpoint of the English gentleman — and assumed a community of

like-minded readers for whom and by whom art and criticism were ideally to be written and read. The ideal probably never existed in reality. There were conflicts and disagreements as to emphasis in critical thought: and as the case of Pater suggests, the codes of criticism, precisely because they were so widely known and understood, were open to creative subversion.

What this chapter has sought to do is to establish a context in which the development of decadence as a literary/cultural term can be understood. Decadence is at least partially a continuation of the process of refining, supporting or subverting the critical standards of earlier generations. Pater provides a link between two periods and two attitudes. He was influenced by Arnold: but resisted that influence through subversive restatement and misquotation of Arnold's views. He was also influenced by Ruskin, against whom he reacted strongly but quietly. He was also influential in his turn, on the generation which followed him, including the subjects of this study, Wilde, Symonds and Vernon Lee. Part of the reason for his influence is that his criticism was not overtly polemical: he did not reject the critical positions of his own predecessors, but worked instead within the framework which earlier criticism had established. This example of 'subversion from within' is what makes an artistic or critical position difficult to pin down, and therefore difficult to erase. It is important in any understanding of decadence because decadence makes use of the critical standard it attacks, depends, indeed, on that standard for its very existence. Pater's example, is therefore fruitful territory in attempting to define decadence.

Notes

¹ Gayatri Spivak, 'Decadent Style', *Language and Style*, 4 (1974), 227-234, p. 227.

² Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. xi-xii.

³ Russell M. Goldfarb, 'Late Victorian Decadence', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 20 (1962), 369-373, p. 370.

⁴ Claude de L. Ryals, 'Towards a Definition of *Decadent* as Applied to British Literature of the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 17 (1958), 85-92, p. 86.

- ⁵ Graham Hough, *The Last Romantics* [1949] (London: Duckworth and Co., 1979).
- ⁶ Edmund Wilson, 'Late Violets from the Nineties', *Dial*, 75 (1923), 387-90, p. 387.
- ⁷ R. K. R. Thornton, "'Decadence' in Later Nineteenth-Century England", in Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (eds), *Decadence and the 1890s*, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 17 (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), pp. 15-30, p. 26.
- ⁸ Thomas Reed Whissen, *The Devil's Advocates: Decadence in Modern Literature* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), p. iv.
- ⁹ Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1979), p. 8.
- ¹⁰ William Wordsworth, 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* [1800] in R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (eds), *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*, 2nd edition (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 226.
- ¹¹ J. S. Mill, 'What is Poetry?' [1833, first published in *Monthly Repository* 7, January, 1833], reprinted in Edward Alexander (ed.), *John Stuart Mill: Literary Essays* (New York: Bobbs Merrill Company, Inc., 1967), pp. 44-63, p. 53.
- ¹² John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* (Volume 3, 1856) in E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds), *The Works of John Ruskin: Library Edition*, Volume 5 (London: George Allen, 1904), pp. 68-9.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- ¹⁴ John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing* [1857], in *The Works of John Ruskin: Library Edition*, Volume 15, op. cit., pp. 117-118.
- ¹⁵ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Volume 3, op. cit., p. 63.
- ¹⁶ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* [1958] (London: The Hogarth Press, 1990), p. 130.
- ¹⁷ John Ruskin, quoted by Williams in *Culture and Society*, p. 136.
- ¹⁸ E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1870-1914* (London: Sphere Books, 1989), p. 181.
- ¹⁹ Wordsworth, 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, op cit., p. 249.
- ²⁰ Matthew Arnold, 'The Scholar Gypsy' [1853], l. 203-5.
- ²¹ Matthew Arnold, 'On the Modern Element in Literature' [1869], in Christopher Ricks (ed.), *Selected Criticism of Matthew Arnold* (New York: Signet Books, 1972), pp. 140-170, p. 149.
- ²² Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* [1869], in Miriam Allott (ed.), *Selected Poems and Prose, Matthew Arnold* (London: J. M. Dent, 1993), pp. 197-201.
- ²³ Matthew Arnold, Letter to Mrs Forster, July, 1849, in Ricks (ed.), *Selected Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, p. 476.
- ²⁴ In his remarks in a letter on Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, Arnold again shows that the relationship between the writer's mind and his/her production is absolute.

Why is *Villette* disagreeable? Because the writer's mind contains nothing but hunger, rebellion and rage, and therefore, that is all she can, in fact, put into her book. No fine writing can hide this thoroughly, and it will be fatal to her in the long run.

See George W. E. Russell (ed.), *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, Volume 1 (London: Macmillan, 1896), p. 34. The life/art homology is the central plank of this critique.

²⁵ 'Preface to First Edition of *Poems*' [1853] in Ricks (ed.), *Selected Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, pp. 27-42, pp. 32-33.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁷ Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*, pp. 82-84.

²⁸ In her short book on Pater, Laurel Brake makes the point that when one reads the essays which made up *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, 'Pater's debts to Arnold and Ruskin are evident.' She comments on the link between Ruskin and Arnold, in that both required that art be moral, and she goes on to suggest that 'what distinguished Pater's prose [in the Preface to *The Renaissance*] is that moral considerations ... are rejected along with all other "abstract" questions as "metaphysical" questions, "of no interest" to the aesthetic critic, whose base is empirical and material in it is adherence to form.' See Laurel Brake, *Walter Pater*, The British Council (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), pp. 23-24, p. 32. Although Pater might reject morality as a critical standard, he does so by referring to that standard, through quotation, misquotation and allusion to Arnold and Ruskin. As Ian Small notes, British culture seldom has 'explicit repudiations or negations of authority.' Instead Pater's opposition is quietly and gently subversive. See Ian Small, 'Literary Radicalism in the British Fin de Siècle,' in

John Stokes (ed.), *Fin de Siècle, Fin du Globe: Fears and Fantasies of the Late Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 210-219, p. 211.

²⁹ The history of the publication of Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* is very complex. Four editions appeared in his lifetime, in 1873, 1877, 1888 and 1893; and each edition had variations of greater or lesser significance in text and in the essays it included. For this discussion of Pater, and throughout this work, I have used Donald L. Hill's edition of *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry. The 1893 Text* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1980), because it collects together all the textual variants of the different editions of the complete text, as well as the periodical publication versions where chapters were published separately. Unless otherwise specified, quotations are taken from Hill's edition, using his record of the 1873 text to amend the 1893 text where necessary. Quotations are cited thus: Pater, ed. Hill., followed by a page number, and an indication of which text edition is being used. See Pater, ed. Hill, p. 49 (1873 text).

³⁰ Symonds's translations appeared in the *Contemporary Review* for September, 1872. Pater omitted the translations from subsequent editions of *The Renaissance*.

³¹ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Volume 3, op. cit., p. 333.

³² Matthew Arnold, 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' [1864] in Ricks (ed.), *Selected Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, p.95.

³³ As Hill notes, the opening of *The Renaissance* is also a veiled attack on Ruskin, of whom Pater disapproves for his insistence on beauty as an abstract ideal. See Pater, ed. Hill, p. 294.

³⁴ The chapter was first published as an article in *The Fortnightly Review*, 22, ns (1877). It is described by Richard L. Stein as 'the theoretical center of the argument implicit throughout *The Renaissance*, that the fine arts should receive no ideological interpretation.' See Richard L. Stein, *The Ritual of Interpretation* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 222.

³⁵ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 388.

Chapter Two Towards a Definition of Decadence

A definition is that which sets limits on meaning, and thereby reassures us that language communicates because its component parts have meaning and stability. The fundamental lesson of deconstruction, however, is that such definitive stability is illusory. The operation of difference and deferral, brought together in Jacques Derrida's coinage *différance* undermines the boundaries which definition is supposed to mark. The operations of *différance* are particularly acute in attempting to define a word such as decadence, since decadence is bound up with transgression — with the wilful crossing of limits of acceptable conduct, discourse, manners and morals. And thus the boundaries that are crossed are demonstrably permeable and impermanent. As Michel Foucault writes, in 'A Preface to Transgression':

Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses. The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more, right to the horizon of the uncrossable.¹

Decadence is a word whose meaning depends on the crossing of the boundary between acceptable and non-acceptable. Its definition always invokes a standard which it also attacks, but without which it cannot exist. The whole ethos of the word therefore is one in which stability of reference is constantly undermined. This differentiates it from satire where an offended standard is invoked in order to re-validate it. It is a commonplace of discussions of decadence either to define in an all-embracing list of attributes, which suggests that it might mean anything or nothing; or, alternatively to throw up one's hands in despair and lament the impossibility of definition.² Because the word invokes an implied standard — of behaviour, of culture, of politics, or literature,

art or criticism — a standard which it refuses to define, and yet which it deliberately subverts, it might exist almost anywhere, or it might exist nowhere.

The dictionary does not help very much. The OED entry on decadence gives full information on its etymology from Latin *decadere*, to decay, from *de* — down + *cadere* — to fall. It comes into English via French *décadence*, and it has its equivalents in all the other Romance languages. The definition speaks of the ‘the process of falling away or declining (from a prior state of excellence, vitality, prosperity, etc.); decay; impaired or deteriorated condition.’ There is a range of quotations dating from 1549 to 1815, which all use the word to suggest decline, in the context of lost hopes, increasing poverty of material circumstance, the ‘decadence of taste and genius’, and a hint of national decline.³ What is missing is any definitive version of the standard of excellence from which decadence marks a fall. A standard is invoked, that is, but is not itself defined. With a second definition of decadence, using the word particularly in relation to a falling away of standards in art or literature, the first recorded use in English is given as 1852; and again the standard from which decadence marks a decline is not discussed.

The dictionary also examines the derivation of an adjective, decadent, and the development of its substantive form, in which the adjective first became a noun in English usage in 1890. Its definition is specifically French: ‘Said of a French school which affects to belong to an age of decadence in literature and art. Hence s.b. a member of this fraternity.’ The use of the word is exemplified first in a quotation from *Figaro* for 22 September, 1885. ‘Le décadent n’a pas d’idées. Il n’en veut pas. Il aime mieux des mots. C’est au lecteur de comprendre et à mettre des idées sous les mots. Le lecteur s’y refuse généralement. De là, méprise du décadent pour le lecteur.’⁴ Its first use in English as a noun is recorded in *The Saturday Review* for 22 September, 1890: ‘The very noisy and motley crew of younger writers in France, ... naturalists, decadents, scientific critics and what not.’ Which implies that the definition of the word in English signifies undesirable qualities of foreignness, unintelligibility, and a strained

relationship between writer and reader, all of which are symptomatic of decline from the excellence of the past.

In his book *The Decadent Dilemma*, R. K. R. Thornton shows that the origins of the English decadence of the 1890s are to be found in France. He proposes a number of sources for cross-channel cross-fertilisation, arguing that the leading writers of the aesthetic movement — Rossetti, Swinburne and Morris in particular — had taken French literature as a source of inspiration for their art which rejected home-grown traditions of the social usefulness and the moral purpose of art. In reading, Baudelaire and Gautier, in translating the works of the French Medieval poets such as Ronsard, Villon and Charles d'Orléans, English writers imported the flavours of a delicately immoral and socially disengaged French tradition of living, as well as an immoral contemporary art. Both Gautier and Baudelaire wrote extensively about decadence; and Verlaine for a short time in the 1880s associated himself overtly with the French decadent movement.⁵

It is much easier to understand the history of French decadence than it is to appreciate the word's currency in English. In French culture there was a classical standard on which everyone agreed — the Alexandrine line of Racine's seventeenth-century plays — against which all poetry and literature could be measured; and there was also a well-established notion of decorum which had limited the content of literature for two centuries. There was, that is, a standard against which the decline which defines decadence might be placed. In his 'Notes Nouvelles sur Edgar Poe' [Further Notes on Edgar Poe], first published as the introduction to Baudelaire's translation of his second volume of Poe in 1857, Baudelaire describes the phrase 'A literature of decadence' as empty words which 'we often hear fall with a pompous yawn from the lips of the sphinxes without a riddle that guard the holy portals of classical aesthetics.'⁶ His comment establishes the link between popular contemporary uses of the word and the sense of a decline from the classical standard. The words are usually used, says Baudelaire, to describe his own favourite poets, and to condemn works which are 'more amusing than the *Iliad*', and which are artfully constructed 'with

a view to surprise, ... splendidly ornate, where all the resources of language and prosody have been exploited by an impeccable hand.' For Baudelaire, there is a difference in decadent writing from the classical standard, but he is unwilling to see difference as a decline; and the difference is located primarily in the new uses made by writers of the stylistic resources of language. He goes on to work through the implications of an organic metaphor of literary and cultural development, which is at the heart of the idea that literature and culture can be in a state of decline. There must be, in such a model, he says, 'a literature in infancy, a literature in childhood, in adolescence, etc.' The term 'a literature of decadence'

presupposes an inevitable and providential purpose, like some inescapable decree; and what then could be more unjust than to reproach us for accomplishing the mysterious law? All the meaning I can extract from this academic pronouncement is that we ought somehow to be ashamed of enjoying our destiny. (*Selected Writings*, p. 189)

He goes on to compare decadence as a cultural phenomenon to the rising and setting of suns, and he takes more pleasure from the image of 'the splendours of this dying sun' than from the sun at midday, 'crushing everything beneath the weight of its vertical white light.'

In this polemical passage, the key features of decadent writing are gathered together. Decadence is a decline from the standard of classical excellence — but it is a decline to be wished for and celebrated. That is, writers who approve of decadence, in contrast to those who do not, see development rather than decline as its key feature. Decadence is a matter of stylistic innovation, from which it gains its most important effects. It is a natural, organic process, and should be praised as such. And its tone is elegaic — with the setting sun acting as 'a marvellous allegory of a soul.' The question of gender appears to be missing from this definition. But, in fact, Baudelaire introduces the issue into the very middle of his discussion, in the figures of two women who represent the preferences of the decadent (and implicitly male) artist:

I have the impression that two women are being introduced to me, one a rustic matron, bursting with rude health and virtuousness, with no style or expression, in short 'owing nothing but to nature unadorned'; the other, one of those beautiful women who dominate and oppress our memories, adding to her own profound native charm the eloquent appeal of dress, knowing exactly how

to walk with grace, aware of her regal poise, with a speaking voice like a well-tuned instrument, and thoughtful eyes that reveal only what they want to. My choice is not in doubt. (*Selected Writings*, p. 188)

His preference is for the woman who knows how to make use of artifice, rather than for the natural woman. He is after subtle and undefinable effects, rather than the open-faced honesty and candour of the natural woman. He prefers the dubious (and perhaps unnatural) pleasures of the city to the 'natural' pleasures of the country. In short, his preference is for the woman who actively constructs and enacts her own femininity, rather than for the woman who is passive in the face of nature.⁷

The attention Baudelaire pays to the artistic construction of femininity has implications also for the position of the male artist. In his recognition of her self-fashioning, he makes himself the willing and self-conscious dupe of her artifice; and, by extension, he recognises that he too is an actor of the part of masculinity. Gender becomes, that is, a pose, a costume and an art. The distinction between life and art, as played out in gender is blurred. In his essay 'The Painter of Modern Life,' written in celebration of the illustrations of Constantin Guys, he speaks of the *flâneur* — the idling strolling observer of city life — as bringing together his passion and his profession, uniting his self with his art.⁸ Later in the same essay, he discusses the dandy — the male equivalent of the ambiguously artificial woman — and he makes explicit the link between the self-conscious pose of gender and the decline of decadent civilisations:

Dandyism appears especially in those periods of transition when democracy has not yet become all-powerful, and when aristocracy is only partially weakened and discredited. In the confusion of such times, a certain number of men, disenchanted and leisured 'outsiders', ... may conceive the idea of establishing a new kind of aristocracy, all the more difficult to break down because established on the most precious, the most indestructible faculties, on the divine gifts that neither work nor money can give. Dandyism is the last flicker of heroism in decadent ages. ... Dandyism is a setting sun; like the declining star, it is magnificent, without heat and full of melancholy. (*Selected Writings*, pp. 421-422)

The models of gender which Baudelaire establishes as associated with decadence are, then, the fatal, artificial woman, and the ambiguously heroic dandy, both figures who disrupt in absolute terms the connection between sex and gender, and

who also subvert the possibility of an art of sincere self-expression. The self which decadent art expresses is not the essential self, the expression of the 'spirits of great men.' Rather, it is a persona — a simulacrum which draws attention to its own artificiality through its dress, make-up and attitude. Baudelaire's definition is reiterated by Théophile Gautier, writing his introduction to the first posthumous edition of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*, though Gautier concentrates more on what might be called the pathological aspects of studied artifice:

le style de décadence ... qui n'est autre chose que l'art arrivé à ce point de maturité extrême que déterminent à leurs soleils obliques les civilisations qui vieillissent: style ingénieux, compliqué, savant, plein de nuances et de recherches, reculant toujours les bornes de la langue, empruntant à tous les vocabulaires techniques, prenant des couleurs à toutes les palettes, des notes à toutes les claviers, s'efforçant à rendre la pensée dans ce qu'elle a de plus ineffable, et la forme en ces contours les plus vagues et les plus fuyants, écoutant pour les traduire les confidences subtiles de la névrose, les aveux de la passion vieillissante qui se déprave et les hallucinations bizarres de l'idée fixe tournant à la folie.

[The style of decadence ... is nothing else than art arrived at that extreme point of maturity produced by those civilisations which are growing old with their oblique suns — a style that is ingenious, complicated, learned, full of shades of meaning and research, always pushing further the limits of language, borrowing from all the technical vocabularies, taking colours from all palettes, notes from all keyboards, forcing itself to express in thought that which is most ineffable, and in form the vaguest and most fleeting contours; listening, that it may translate them, to the subtle confidences of the neuropath, the avowals of ageing and depraved passion, and to the singular hallucinations of the fixed idea verging on madness.]⁹

The history of decadence as a critical term, in both France and England, is heavily dependent for its identification on its tortured style, as both Gautier and Baudelaire insisted. But the concentration on an obscure, unclear, complex, *recherché* vocabulary and syntax had other implications, as Gautier's remarks, and as the English critical tradition both attest. The implication of difficulty and complexity — the wilful distortion, or even 'perversion', of style — is that it is also a distortion or perversity of content; and these features map onto the figure of the artist himself. As Thais E. Morgan suggests, perversity carries both negative and positive connotations. When it is used to define the life of the artist, it is a term which speaks the outrage of the critic who uses it; but it can also be used to suggest, as the OED shows, that an artefact is 'not in

accordance with the accepted standard or practice.’¹⁰ In this way, perversity is linked to the meaning of decadence, and depending on whether it is used as a mode of attack or as an aesthetic judgement, it is a matter of the subversion of standards of sex, sexuality and gender, or a matter for artistic praise.

Both perversity and decadence are connected to the deliberate assumption of exaggerated gender roles, of the types that might be found in gothic horror stories: the style implies the substance, the style *is* the man. In Gautier’s discussion of Baudelaire, he identifies the subject through the style: its distortion is best suited to the description of subjects including madness, depraved passion and hallucination. In contrast to the French critical tradition, which saw life steadily and whole, and with decorum, decadent style ‘admits shading’: ‘And these shadows teem and swarm with the larvae of superstitions, the haggard phantoms of insomnia, nocturnal terrors, ... monstrous dreams ..., obscure phantasies ... and all that the soul conceals of the dark, the unformed and the vaguely horrible, in its deepest and furthest recesses’.¹¹

In as much as a decadent style expresses the personality of the artist, then, that personality is profoundly disturbed, and belongs to the traditions of the gothic, which Eve Sedgwick has identified with both decadence and alternative sexual practices. The allure of decadence, she writes,

lies in its promise of initiatory shortcuts to the secret truths of adulthood. The secrets of its sexuality are represented by its practices ... that run counter to the official version. In a close relation with these, the secrets of class are represented in decadent literature by elements of the bourgeoisie that can disassociate themselves from the productive modes of their class, and, by learning to articulate an outdated version of aristocratic values, can seem to offer some critique of ... bourgeois official culture.¹²

Like gothic writing, decadence does violence to a standard of art and a standard of behaviour or conduct. That violence is to be found in both form and content of the text; but it is also contextual, depending on the sense that both artist and the community in which he exists have undergone a violent decline. Gautier associated decadence with the fall of empires, as well as with gothic horrors, and he placed it somewhere between the ‘gameyness’ which adds savour to meat, and the absolute corruption which signals imperial, national, cultural and personal decline. As Sedgwick suggests elsewhere, the

most easily identifiable symptom of decline in these terms is the perception of the prevalence of perverse sexualities, in particular same-sex desire between men, which is itself an example of the withdrawal from the 'productive modes' of the bourgeoisie.¹³

For the French at mid-century and beyond, decadence meant obscure styles in literature, and strange indecorous content. It was connected to ideas of decline from former standards of excellence; it eschewed the bright midday sun, and preferred the half-lights and shadows of sunset. It was implicitly understood that such experiments of style, content and tone were bound up with experiments beyond the textual sphere. The writer fell away, that is, not only from standards of textual excellence, but also from official bourgeois codes of morality, sexual conduct and gender definition, preferring the artificial constructions of the *femme fatale*, the dandy and the *flâneur*. What then are the associations of decadence in the English usage of the term?

We have already noted that Walter Pater had subtly altered the critical standards which he had inherited from his immediate predecessors through his subversion of the concept of critical objectivity, and his valorisation of a critical standard dependent on the temperament of the viewer rather than on the intrinsic qualities of the thing viewed. His language practice had also disrupted the ideal of clarity in criticism. Throughout *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* he had also insisted on the critical relationship between worship of the Pagan gods in Greece and Christianity, thereby suggesting that Christianity was not the apotheosis of divine revelation. Indeed, he defines the Renaissance as the coming together of spirit of the Catholic Middle Ages with the bodily perfections of Ancient Greece. He denies, that is, the version of morality which depends on the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In his essay on Winckelmann, he denied to religious sympathy the importance it is traditionally accorded and absolved Winckelmann for 'the insincerity of his religious profession' which was 'only one incident of a culture in which the moral instinct, like the religious or political, was lost in the artistic' (Pater, ed. Hill, p. 149, 1873 text). Such things are unimportant in the service of art. The refusal of conventional morality in Pater's writing is one of the features which will later be called decadent, when Pater's ideas were adapted by his

followers. His style was another feature which was imitated, and which was, in his imitators, labelled decadent. John Morley, reviewing 'Mr. Pater's Essays' in the *Fortnightly Review* in April, 1873, praised Pater, but also sought to warn possible imitators away from his style:

From the point of view of form and literary composition they are striking in the highest degree. ... Their style is marked by a flavour at once full and exquisite, by a quality that mixes riches with delicacy, and a firm coherency with infinite subtlety. The peril that besets a second-rate writer who handles a style of this kind lies in the direction of effeminate and flaccid mannerism. ... subtlety and love of minor tones may lead a writer who is not in constant and rigorous discipline into affectation and a certain mawkishness.¹⁴

These are the terms in which decadence will be defined in the 1890s. But Pater defined more than the style and substance of what would come to be called decadence; he also defined one of the attitudes which was important to its definition at the century's end.

In the 'Preface' to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Pater praised the later French Renaissance as 'an aftermath, a wonderful later growth, the products of which have to the full the subtle and delicate sweetness which belong to a refined and comely decadence' (Pater, ed. Hill, p. xxiii, 1873 text), suggesting that decadence need not necessarily be a term of insult. In 'Joachim du Bellay', an essay concerned with the sixteenth-century French writers of the Pléiade, in which J. A. Symonds noted the influence of Baudelaire and Gautier,¹⁵ Pater provides a quasi-definition of decadence in terms that refer to the two French writers, but that Baudelaire and Gautier would not quite have recognised.

... these poets are never serious.¹⁶ Mythology, which with the great Italians had been a motive so weighty and severe, becomes with them a mere toy. That 'Lord of Terrible Aspect,' *Amor*, has become the *petit enfant*, *Amour*. They are full of fine railleries; they delight in diminutives. ... Their loves are only half real, a vain effort to prolong the imaginative lives of the middle age beyond their natural lifetime ... and sometimes their gaiety becomes satiric, for, as they play, real passions insinuate themselves, and at least the reality of death; their dejection at the thought of leaving *le beau séjour du commun jour* is expressed by them with almost wearisome reiteration. But with this sentiment too they are able to trifle; the imagery of death serves for a delicate ornament, and they weave into the airy nothingness of their verses their trite reflexions on the very vanity of life; just as the grotesques of the charnel house nest themselves together with birds and flowers and the fancies of pagan mythology, in the traceries of the architecture of that time, which wantons in its delicate arabesques with the images of old age and death. (Pater, ed. Hill, pp. 134-5, 1873 text)

In definitions of decadence from French nineteenth-century writers, the pose of worldweariness is just a pose; but it is a pose adopted with exaggerated seriousness, or earnestness. Baudelaire's dandy, for example, may be witty, but he does not tell jokes: he takes himself seriously as the guardian of outmoded aristocratic values. What Pater praises in the writers of the Pléiade is their playfulness, their refusal to take serious things seriously. Several features identified by other writers as decadent are present here: there is exaggeration in style, the coterie language of a closed group exchanging its 'diminutives', inappropriate and disproportionate combinations of images; a refusal to take sacred subjects — death and love — seriously. The poetry produced by the Pléiade is perfect for its audience of 'weary princes' (the sixteenth-century kings of France), an audience 'a little jaded,' who 'have a constant desire for a subdued and delicate excitement to warm their creeping fancy a little' (Pater, ed. Hill, p. 135, 1873 text). Pater, that is, has taken the elements of decadence, and added to them the possibilities of decadence as 'play' — the pose need not be too serious — and the essential relationship of writer and audience.

This is not to say that Pater was himself a decadent writer, or a decadent person. For one thing, he was not a flamboyant or self-dramatising, visible personality. He did not manifest the dandyism which, with Baudelaire in France, or Wilde in England, was supposed to indicate masculine decadence. Nonetheless, with Pater, elements of decadence defined by French writers were given a currency in England. His emphasis on the dying fall, his sympathetic feeling for the beauty of autumn and decay, his careful vocabulary and tortuous syntax, his insistent connection of Christianity to older Pagan, Greek forms, and his philosophical justifications of the importance of the artistic temperament, are all part of the flavour of decadence. His description of Leonardo's *La Gioconda* brings together most of these ideas into a single image of a fatal woman. But he is important in the development of decadence in England because those who were influenced by him did not stop short at his elusiveness and strategies of implication. Instead, they pushed his ideas, along with those derived from their French models into

the open. And, as a result, decadence became a kind of writing which, although it remained *recherché* and complex, tended nonetheless to speak the illicit more clearly. The playfulness praised in Pater's discussion of the Pléiad is transformed into an openly defiant series of poses. And his reticence is spoken aloud.

In the pages of the reviews, journals and books of the 1890s in England, the definitions of decadence depended absolutely on whether the reviewer approved or disapproved the term and those he (the writers of these reviews were almost all male) identified as its practitioners. Arthur Symons, the most positive writer on decadence in the early years of the decade, writing, in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), after he had abandoned the word, if not the features of, decadence, sums up the contextuality of the definitions. 'Meanwhile, something which is vaguely called decadence has come into being. That name, rarely used with any precise meaning, was usually either hurled as a reproach, or hurled back as a defiance.'¹⁷ Some writers deliberately achieved decadence, whilst others had it thrust upon them. The mainstream periodical press — *The Westminster Review*, *The Quarterly Review*, *The Contemporary Review*, *The Saturday Review* and *Blackwood's Magazine* — carried articles in which decadence figured basically as a favoured term of insult. The 'little magazines', with their much smaller circulations, produced more considered and ambivalent responses, as suited their readers, small in numbers, but more liberal in attitude than the readers of the mainstream press. As Ian Fletcher notes, titles such as the *Artist and Journal of Home Culture* and *The Century Guild Hobby Horse* frequently used the word 'decadent' 'either neutrally or in laudation'.¹⁸ The only really sympathetic portrait of decadence in the mainstream press was Arthur Symons's 'The Decadent Movement in Literature,' which appeared in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in November, 1893; and its appearance in such a widely read (and largely conservative forum), is, as Laurel Brake notes, surprising to say the least.¹⁹

Discussions of decadence appearing in the mainstream press in the 1890s concentrated on two fundamental areas of definition: decadence was foreign (meaning,

for the most part, French), and it corrupted English culture by bringing foreign immorality to our doorsteps; and decadence was a matter of sexually explicit content in literary texts. Where decadence could be classed as French, it is described as the natural outgrowth of a culture which has been immoral from time immemorial. In two anonymously written reviews in 1890 and 1892, the Reverend W. F. Barry discoursed on 'Realism and Decadence in French Fiction,' and on 'The French Decadence'.²⁰ In the first of the articles, Barry identified an interest in 'representing the abnormal' as an undesirable trait of French literature throughout the nineteenth century; it was obvious especially in writers such as Hugo, Balzac, Flaubert and Zola. These writers, he argues, concentrate on 'the abnormal, *not* the ideal. .. The Sophoclean standard, "man as he ought to be", did not please them at all' ('Realism and Decadence', p. 63). For Barry, as for many other commentators, realism, naturalism and decadence were closely aligned cultural phenomena; each shared a disdain for the ideal in art and literature, and the danger of them came from the fact that they spoke of subjects inappropriate to literature in a manner inappropriate to literary style. In particular, he argued, these movements mix the discourses of science and medicine with the discourse of literature, when these things should be kept radically separate. Thus, whilst he does not deny that Balzac's monomaniac characters might well exist, he disapproves of their appearance in the literary text: 'Experience conversant with prisons, asylums and reformatories would have strange stories to tell. ... But the pathological — as in these days we should never weary of repeating — is not the human' ('Realism and Decadence', p. 69).

The real culprit is, however, Gautier who is the creator and agent of French decadence. Whilst the brutalities of Realism are disgusting, the refinements of its outgrowth, decadence, are worse, because they insist so strongly on the separation of art from morality. Gautier is the founder of a French school of decadence in which:

sensuous feeling and artistic *insouciance* should be all in all. Why must art be subservient to ends beyond itself? Why not paint for painting's sake...? The cultivation of form without regard to matter, has invariably generated into the worship of the five senses. 'Art for Art' is, in the strictest meaning of the world, idolatry, the taking of shadow for substance and resting in phenomena. ('Realism and Decadence', p. 70)

Gautier anticipated the time when “decadence” would seem natural, putrefaction the chief condition of life, and perverted instincts the true humanity’ (71). Modern French literature is merely a literature of the senses; it appeals either by the ‘word-painting’ of its style or the realist brutality of its content (73). As such, French decadence is symptomatic of the decline of the French nation and its culture, a decline from which English culture must take good care to guard itself:

A putrescent civilisation, a corruption of high and low, a cynical shamelessness, meet us at every turn, from the photographs which insult modesty on the Boulevards, and the pornographic literature on the bookstalls, from the multiplication of divorces, and the ‘drama of adultery’ ... The civilising bond of the moral law has burst asunder in France; and the whole beast nature it kept in check is stripping itself of the last shreds of decency so that it may go about naked and not ashamed. ... These are not merely the symptoms of a revolution; they are prognostics of an intellectual and moral suicide. We may ... assert that when Christianity has been cast out, science, art and principle will follow it. For man to ‘sleep the sleep of the brute,’ means not only the decadence, but the end, of a civilisation. (‘Realism and Decadence’, pp. 89-90)

The second of Barry’s articles, ‘The French Decadence’ is at once a review and a kind of pre-dated obituary for Guy de Maupassant.²¹ He reads Maupassant as a decadent writer primarily because of his subject matter rather than his style, which, indeed, he praises for showing no ‘affectation of artistic phrase’; and he comments on Maupassant’s hearty contempt for the decadence of a ‘vocabulaire bizarre, compliqué, nombré et chinois’ (‘The French Decadence,’ pp. 485-6).²² He descended to decadence in style only when he became ill, ‘when his mental tone was enfeebled’, suggesting that such style is a symptom of mental incapacity. Nonetheless, Maupassant remains a symptom of French cultural decline from which England must take warning. Whilst the French peasant is ‘too little civilised to be decadent’,

in Maupassant and his like we find evidence which not the most stubborn optimist can rebut or refuse, that the upper and middle classes of the French have fallen into a most unhealthy condition. ... We look upon the tribe of Zolas, Renans, Bourgets, Daudets and Maupassants as among the most dangerous enemies France has nourished in her bosom. Vain, utterly vain it is to praise their skill in the art of literature, their acquaintance with all manner of human passions, the vivid power of their brutality, or the melting charm of their putrescence. What arguments are these to address to a nation on the very edge of the abyss? And how shall we account of Englishmen, (such as are not wanting), who can see in the wide plagues to which we have been calling our readers’ notice, merely a feature of the moment, artistic trifling, and not the

proof as well as the symptom, that a process of death, moral, spiritual, intellectual, and even physical, have set in among the French who have yielded to revolutionary principles? ('The French Decadence', pp. 503-504)

Barry ends this breathless diatribe with an apocalyptic vision. All that can save us from this fall is 'the lightning of indignation, human or divine'.

In these two articles, Barry identified many of the major ideas about decadence which were to have currency in the mainstream press in the 1890s. Decadence, first of all, is French. It is a symptom of French national decline, and the English must both congratulate themselves that they do not yet suffer from this scourge, and use the lesson of France to ensure that they do not, in their turn, become victims. Decadence can be detected in the form and content of French literature; this literature, whilst not an exact equivalent of French life is a part of that life, and mirrors its major features. Decadence is to be found in immoral subject matter — a shorthand term for all types of sexual subject in varying degrees of explicitness, from adultery to incest. It is to be found also in the jewelled phrases of an arcane vocabulary. It is present when either the form or the content give rise to comment. What French decadence tells the English is: that French culture is rotten, 'putrescent'; French civilization is in deep decline; and the English stand in profound danger of following into the 'abyss' if they do not guard themselves and the lives and literature from this unhealthy taint. Underlying the rhetoric of Barry's article, there is the fear that cultural decline leads inevitably to the fall of empires; that it is the natural cultural condition of, in Gautier's words, 'civilisations which are growing old.'

Other commentators focused their discussion much more closely on content, though the rhetoric still implied a national decline. In particular, the treatment of sexual relations, of marriage and adultery drew the accusation of decadence: until the Wilde trials, sex was always heterosexual, even when it was perverse in its straying from conventional standards of married morality. Because of this emphasis, the New Woman fiction of writers as different as George Egerton and Sarah Grand came to be read as decadent writers. Writing in 1894 in *The Westminster Review*, Thomas Bradfield saw sex as 'A Dominant Note of Some Recent Fiction', and he linked sexual

themes with decadence and New Women writers. The article is a review and commentary on several recently published works. The author pronounces himself nostalgic for an older morality, from which contemporary fiction is distancing itself. He fears that the tendency, particularly amongst women writers, to discuss sexual matters is leading English literature into a period of decadence. He identifies Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensation novels of the 1860s as the starting point for this decline, noting that the 'strong meat' of this early fiction soon palled, leading to a taste for something 'new and more highly seasoned'.²³ The result, in writers like Egerton and Grand is:

a class of story with the central pivot of its interest bound up with the passion of two young, ardent, attractive beings, in the chains of whose rapturous intercourse one indispensable link was ... wanting, to render it fair and honourable. It was not that adultery or illicit intercourse between men and women was any new feature in fiction; but the exceptionally attractive manner in which these were draped gave to this new presentation a subtly insidious character. ('A Dominant Note', p. 538)

Bradfield seeks and finds illicit intercourse everywhere — in the West End theatres where *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* and *A Woman of No Importance* cause no blushes in their audience; and more worryingly still, in the drawing room where Egerton's *Keynotes*, Grand's *Heavenly Twins* and George Moore's *Esther Waters* are read in private. He contrasts the flagrant treatment of such themes with the publication (in 1859) of George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, which was deemed very shocking at the time, but which seems really rather tame in 1894.

Sex should have no place in literature, Bradfield argues, because it is a scientific subject. Lack of reticence on the English stage and in the English drawing room have been directly caused by the influence of foreign writers — he names Zola and Ibsen — who have not understood that science is one thing, and art is quite another: 'we ... will endeavour to call a spade a spade; and the gentlest epithet which to our mind characterises this recent school of realistic fancies is unwholesome.' ('A Dominant Note', p. 539). This straight-talking critique of contemporary fiction is intended to guarantee literature as a healthy discourse, in contrast to the 'half-articulate cries of one in pain' which characterise the 'strong meat' of modern fiction. The dominant note

which gives the article its title is a note of sexual licence which suggests that English literature has 'entered upon a stage of decadence.' ('A Dominant Note', p. 543) But he identifies heterosexual sex, in particular adultery, as the source of this decline: it is dependent on the calling into question of the standards of sexual conduct between men and women.

The same 'dominant note' was picked up by James Aschcroft Noble, in an essay entitled 'The Sexuality of Fiction,' in *The Contemporary Review* in 1895. Like other writers in the mainstream press, he was concerned about the sexual explicitness of much recent fiction, which, he argued, 'presents to us a series of pictures painted in convex mirrors, the colossal nose which dominates the face being represented by one colossal appetite which dominates life. ... everywhere it is a flagrant violation of the obvious proportion of life.' No matter who the characters in the novels might be, 'the sexual passion provides the mainspring of their action, and within its range lies their whole gamut of emotion. Is this persistent presentation of the most morbid symptoms of erotomania a seeing of life steadily and whole? Is it even a clear truthful seeing of that part of life which it unnaturally isolates?'²⁴ Noble invokes the Arnoldian standard of clear seeing and proportion to disapprove of contemporary writing, which he regards as a grotesque distortion of proportion, the writing of life in the mode of caricature. Disproportion was to become one of the code words which signalled decadence.

It was not until the scandal of the Wilde Trials in April and May, 1895, that definitions of decadence were specifically associated with the 'decline' implied by same-sex desire. The tone of the periodical press became, thereafter, virtually hysterical in its condemnation of all decadent manifestations. The flames were fanned by the publication in English of Max Nordau's *Degeneration*, almost simultaneously with Wilde's imprisonment (it appeared in May, 1895). Nordau's book insisted, through more than five hundred pages, that artistic genius and criminal insanity were closely aligned to degeneration, the theory of evolutionary decline. The symptom of such decline, when it is not found in mental asylums and prisons, is found 'in all sorts of odd aesthetic fashions.'

All these new tendencies, realism or naturalism, 'decadentism', neo-mysticism, and their sub-varieties, are manifestations of degeneration and hysteria, and identical with the mental stigmata which the observations of clinicists have unquestionably established as belonging to these. ... Led by this firmly linked chain of causes and effects, everyone capable of logical thought will recognise that he commits a serious error if, in the aesthetic schools which have sprung up in the last few years, he sees the heralds of a new era. They do not direct us to the future, but point backwards to times past. Their word is no ecstatic prophecy, but the senseless stammering and babbling of deranged minds, and what the ignorant hold to be the outbursts of gushing, youthful vigour and turbulent constructive impulses are really nothing but the convulsions and spasms of exhaustion. (Nordau, p. 43)

The symptoms of decadent art are to be found in both style and content, and, by extension, in the lives of degenerate artists. They include a style dependent on repetition, and on the combination of 'completely disconnected nouns and adjectives', which 'we have learnt to know as the marks of intellectual debility.' (Nordau, pp. 124-

6) In Baudelaire, Nordau finds his ideal specimen of the degenerate artist.

He has the 'cult of the self'; he abhors nature, movement and life; he dreams of an ideal of immobility, of eternal silence, of symmetry and artificiality; he loves disease, ugliness and crime; all his inclinations, in profound aberration, are opposed to those of sane beings; what charms his sense of smell is the odour of corruption; his eye, the sight of carrion, suppurating wounds, and the pain of others; he feels happy in muddy, cloudy, autumn weather; his senses are excited by unnatural pleasures only. He complains of frightful tedium and of feelings of anguish; his mind is filled with sombre ideas, the association of his ideas works exclusively with sad or loathsome images; the only thing which can distract or interest him is badness — murder, blood, lewdness and falsehood. He addresses his prayers to Satan, and aspires to hell. (Nordau, p. 294)

This is a literature which has disgust at its heart, which is selfish, unnatural and unproductive. The symptoms of decadence in art shade, in Nordau's rhetoric, into the features of the artist who is personified as degenerate because of what he produces, in an alliance in which sickness and symptoms cannot be separated. In this rhetoric, 'any cultural manifestation of "exception" comes to be seen as a crisis or a symptom of disease.'²⁵ And, as William Greenslade argues, the terms degenerate and decadent were 'intentionally elided', and were, indeed, closely linked as descriptive terms: like decadence, for example, degeneration, 'entails the existence of a norm from which degeneration has occurred.'²⁶

In the heat of moral indignation which followed the Wilde trials, there was a single figure who represented 'decadence' in many of the same terms which Nordau

had identified Baudelaire's degeneracy/decadence: Wilde himself. In a review of *Degeneration*, entitled "'Tommyrotics'" in *Blackwood's Magazine* for June, 1895, Hugh E. M. Stutfield referred to Wilde, quite deliberately, but also allusively. Stutfield's article praised *Degeneration* as a book with an excellent thesis, which is marred by its overstatement. He is sure that the English are in relatively little danger of degeneration and 'decadentism': 'Decadentism is an exotic growth unsuited to British soil, and it is to be hoped that it will never take permanent root here'.²⁷ Like Bradfield before him, he sees the greatest danger from 'our decadent lady novelists', singling out George Egerton's *Discords* (1894) for particular disapproval, because it is so full of 'gleanings from the surgery and the lecture room.' Such writing need not, however, be taken too seriously, since it is, 'as a rule, robustly ungrammatical' ("Tommyrotics", p. 837).

Stutfield's definition of decadence and degeneracy — the terms are interchangeable throughout the article — is that it is a matter of personal and political rebellion, carried out in the service of egoism, through a willed disengagement from social, cultural and political norms. His definition is directly indebted to Nordau:

Along with its diseased imaginings — its passion for the abnormal, the morbid, and the unnatural — the anarchical spirit broods over all literature of the decadent and 'revolting' type. It is rebellion all along the line. Everybody is to be a law unto himself. The restraints and conventions which civilised mankind have set over their appetites are absurd, and should be dispensed with. Art and morality have nothing to do with one another ...; there is nothing clean but the unclean; wickedness is a myth, and morbid impressionability is the one cardinal virtue. ... [The English decadents/degenerates] are cultivators of the 'I' — moral and social rebels. ("Tommyrotics", pp. 837-8)²⁸

Importantly, he concludes that decadent rebellion is a symptom of cultural effeminacy: 'whether in politics or art, [it] has the same inevitable effect of sapping manliness, and making people flabby. To the aesthete and decadent, who worship inaction, all strenuousness is naturally repugnant' ("Tommyrotics", p. 842). The trial of Wilde for gross indecency, that is, shifted the grounds of the definitions of decadence from an earlier basis in heterosexual licence, to new grounds of the subversion of gendered identity aligned with a sexuality which could only be named in periphrasis, as unmanliness or effeminacy.

Another article published in June, 1895, Harry Quilter's 'The Gospel of Intensity', picked up on the sexual politics of decadence in the unstated context of the Wilde trials. Like Stutfield, Quilter does not name Wilde, but he refers to the events 'in the last three weeks', and goes on to describe Wilde:

the fall of the high priest of aestheticism has struck the public imagination — if not roused its conscience. For this man, connected by his abilities and tastes almost equally with art of fiction, drama, poetry and painting, was one whose personality and influence have played a great part in recent art criticism and production — he was the living embodiment of *l'art pour l'art*. It is not my business to cast a stone at him, nor have I any wish or intention to dwell upon a subject so unpleasant, but it is necessary to remember his intimate association with certain phases of English art and fiction, in speaking of the public estimation of them at the present time.²⁹

The tendency of modern English art and fiction, therefore, is intimately connected with Wilde; and his downfall implies that there is something wrong with English culture.

Quilter's argument is that, whilst he does not wish to place any undue limitations on art and literature, he believes that 'life can be dealt with fully and honestly only when it is considered from a healthy and manly (or womanly) point of view.'

I deny that the morbid extravagances of hysterically neurotic and erotic imagination are to be accepted as a sound basis or a proper sphere of analysis for either art or literature; I am assured that there are some subjects in themselves so repellent, so enervating, and so unprofitable, that they should be practically excluded from the domain of literary discussion or artistic representation. ... it is the absolute duty of every public writer ... to discourage and condemn work of such character, and even work which leads more or less directly to it. ('Gospel of Intensity', p. 761)

With that programme of discouragement and condemnation in mind, Quilter rails against an age — the past ten years — in which virtually all artistic innovation has been 'mistaken from the aesthetic point of view ... and injudicious from the moral.' This period of artistic misdirection is, however, nearly over, because of the events of the past three weeks. Egerton's *Discords* has been greeted everywhere with distaste; John Davidson's *The Strange Adventures of Earl Lavender*, with its salacious illustrations by Beardsley, has been withdrawn by Mudie's; and 'two or three of the least savoury of our illustrated papers have ceased to exist' ('Gospel of Intensity', p. 762).

Quilter invokes a standard for literature in which the primary aim is 'to give pleasure — to be delightful' (p. 769). Novels such as Arthur Morrison's *Tales of*

Mean Streets, the *Keynotes* series published by John Lane, and the illustrated periodical press, in particular *The Yellow Book*, are to be condemned for their unsavoury subject matter, which borders on the pornographic, for their photographic realism, and their language. Their preoccupation with the sexual is neurotic and hysterical, 'induced by the morbid conditions of the brain and heart' (p. 771). His final attack is reserved for the illustrator of 'many works of the erotic and decadent schools,' Aubrey Beardsley. In the attack on Beardsley, the sexual politics of decadence comes to fore, with the artist's concentration on androgynous or hermaphrodite figures causing Quilter to become outraged:

however unnatural, extravagant, and morbid are the stories and poems of the modern decadence, ... there is not one of them which is more perverted in what it says than [Beardsley's] grotesques, in which the types of manhood and womanhood are, as it were, mingled together, and result in a monstrous, sexless amalgam, miserable, morbid, dreary and unnatural. (p. 778)

When Quilter invoked manly and womanly points of view as the standards of honesty and health in literature, it is clear that he had in mind the transgression of gender boundaries in art (in Beardsley's illustration) and in life (with his scarcely veiled references and attacks on Wilde) as the primary symptom of decadent art and decadent morality. The standards invoked are those of convention in style, subject matter and the implied (or actual) conduct of the artist. Such conventionality supported the identification of culture with national prowess on which the Reverend Barry had insisted. The discourses of decadence in the mainstream press insisted also on a matrix of associations around sex, sexuality and gender. If New Woman fiction was unwomanly because it dealt with subjects that no lady should consider, then decadent male artists risked being called to account for their own uncertain sexual status, identified by Quilter as hermaphrodites and grotesques, and by Noble as disproportionate caricatures.

For the mainstream press, then, decadence was a term of insult and moral indignation which pointed at unEnglishness, distortion, immorality and effeminacy as defining characteristics. Form, content and the life of the artist were equally implicated in these discussions. Elsewhere, the treatment was different. Writers in the smaller

magazines could not but be aware of the standard of 'normality' which was invoked to mark the extent of decadence's decline from the ideals of art, culture and conduct. But the definitions offered by more sympathetic or neutral commentators either refused to take up the same grounds of definition, or refused to see those grounds in disapproving terms. Richard Le Gallienne, reviewing John Gray's poems, *Silverpoints*, in March, 1893, noted what the common definitions of decadence were:

In what does decadence consist? In a self-conscious arrangement of 'coloured' vowels, in a fastidious distribution of accents, resulting in new and subtler harmonies of verse — say some. In the choice for themes of disease and forbidden things generally — say others. ... I do not think that either is the starting point of that school.³⁰

The common definitions are objectionable because, if perfection of style is the locus of decadence, then Virgil and Tennyson are decadent; and if subject defines decadence, then Rabelais and Swift are decadents too. Instead, decadence must be defined as a matter of attitude, in which the artist isolates the features of his art, and sees them as separate from morality, pity, humour and religion. Le Gallienne draws, nonetheless, on the common expectations of the decadent poet to argue that 'Mr Gray's poems are not so decadent as he would have us suppose':

They are luxurious to the last degree, they are subtly cadenced as the song the sirens sang, they will dwell over-unctuously on many forbidden themes. ... But in spite of his neo-Catholicism and his hot-house erotics, Mr. Gray cannot accomplish that gloating abstraction from the larger life of humanity which marks the decadent. (pp. 230-231)

Decadence here is a matter of lust and sensuality in theme, and of sensuality of form, as well as 'neo-Catholic' — a suspect foreign form which embraces both worship and blasphemy. The article then goes on to reprise some of the attitudes towards decadence which Le Gallienne had already developed in *The Century Guild Hobby Horse* in January, 1892. This essay was a review of Churton Collins's *Illustrations of Tennyson* (1891), which had suggested that Tennyson's style was decadent because it was so carefully wrought. In seeking to defend Tennyson against the charge of decadence, Le Gallienne produced one of the classic statements of the meaning of

decadence, which again rejected the debate over style and content, and which defined decadence instead as a lack of proportion.

It is in the character of the treatment that we must seek [decadence]. In all great, vital literature, the theme ... is always considered in all its relations ... and above all in relation to the sum total of things...; in decadent art, the relations, the due proportions are ignored. ... [D]ecadence consists in the euphuistic expression of isolated observations. Thus, disease, which is the favourite theme of *décadents* does not in itself make for decadence: it is only when ... it is studied apart from its relations to health, to the great vital centre of things, that it does so. Any point of view, seriously taken, which ignores the complete view, approaches decadence. To notice only the picturesque effects of a beggar's rags, like Gautier; the colour scheme of a tipster's nose, like M. Huysmans; to consider one's mother merely prismatically, like Mr. Whistler — these are examples of the decadent attitude.³¹

Tennyson is absolved of such a decadent attitude because he is one of those poets 'who see life steadily and whole' (p. 81), demonstrating again the extent to which Arnold's formulation informed late nineteenth-century critical ideals. Whilst Le Gallienne saw decadence as an accusation from which great poets needed to be defended, he nonetheless claims for literature the freedom to express what it will, in any style of its choosing, so long as it does so with a sense of proportion.

Lionel Johnson, also writing in the *Hobby Horse*, defined decadence as an import of French culture. But the transition from France to England is not a simple one because of fundamental differences between the French and English languages, and the habits of mind which they each display. Johnson argues that French always requires care and deliberation if the writer is to produce musical effects. English literature, on the other hand, contains masterpieces which have 'no perfection of detail, no careful excellence of language. ... Verbal or minute perfection is not our strength.'³² His definition of decadence is matter of periodisation: it is an outgrowth of a developed culture in which older forms are treated anew and with increased refinement.

In English, *décadence* and the literature thereof mean this: the period at which passion, or romance, or tragedy, or sorrow, or any other form of activity, or of emotion, must be refined upon and curiously considered, for literary treatment: an age of afterthought, of reflection. Hence come one great virtue and one great vice: the virtue of much and careful meditation upon life, its emotions and its incidents: the vice of over-subtlety and of affectation, when thought thinks upon itself, and when emotions become entangled with the consciousness of them. (p. 64)

Johnson avoids discussing the morality of form and content. Decadence is here a manifestation of a culture's maturity which may lead to decline, but does not necessarily do so. That maturity leads culture to careful reflection: but a culture which thinks too carefully loses spontaneity, becomes self-reflexive and self-conscious, and it loses its sense of proportion: consciousness of emotion is more important than emotion itself, implying that the artist watches himself in the surface pose of emotion rather than feeling emotion deeply.

Arthur Symons's statement of the meaning of decadence in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in November, 1893 draws together the two contexts of definition — the mainstream press and the little magazines. The context of the family magazine implies at least that the term had sufficient currency to require definition for a wider audience; and the choice of Symons — member of the Rhymers' Club, friend and admirer of the scandalous French poet Paul Verlaine — as the source of the definition, brought some of the atmosphere of the little magazines into the respectable drawing room. The article also brings together the contempt for decadence expressed in the mainstream with the measured admiration to be found elsewhere. Symons argues at the outset that the word decadence is misunderstood in England because it comes from France, where it is not used consistently any more than it is in English. The terms which define modern literature, says Symons, terms such as Decadence, Impressionism and Symbolism, 'have been adopted as the badge of the separate little cliques, the noisy, brainsick young people who haunt the brasseries of the Boulevard Saint-Michel, and exhaust their ingenuities theorizing over the works they cannot write'.³³ He seeks to shed light on the inexact definitions of the various uses of the word, and thereby to recuperate decadence as a descriptive term as opposed to a favourite insult.

For Symons, contemporary literature is neither romantic nor classical. It shares, in contrast to classical literature, the features of the Greek and Latin decadences:

an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity. If what we call the classic is indeed the supreme art — those qualities of perfect simplicity, perfect sanity, perfect proportion, the supreme qualities — then this representative literature of today, interesting, beautiful, novel as it is, is really a new and beautiful and interesting disease. ('Decadent Movement,' pp. 858-859)

Like Romanticism, 'that old antithesis of the Classic,' decadence opposes the standards of mental and physical health represented by classical authors. This is a function, as with Johnson's definition, of a period in history when civilization and culture have moved beyond simple structures, and require more complex modes of representation to reflect the increasingly complex life of humanity. Symons draws the connection between decadent life and decadent art implicit in much nineteenth-century criticism; his tone is, however, neither indignant nor celebratory. It is as if he is instead trying to describe an interesting but morally neutral cultural phenomenon as objectively as possible.

this literature is certainly typical of a civilization grown over-luxurious, over-inquiring, too languid for the relief of action, too uncertain for any emphasis in opinion or in conduct. It reflects all the moods, all the manners of a sophisticated society; its very artificiality is a way of being true to nature; simplicity, sanity, proportion — the classic qualities — how much do we possess them in our life, our surroundings, that we should look to find them in our literature — so evidently a literature of a decadence? ('The Decadent Movement', p. 859)

He refers to the critical tradition that literature and culture can be taken as an index of moral life. But the emphasis is different from that of critics in other organs of the press, who saw that the aim of literature was to idealise real life in the text, and thence to affect a subsequent idealisation of real life. Symons's definition takes away the purposive nature of a literature which can no longer legislate questions of opinion and conduct, but which rather merely reflects what is 'out there'. Hence, the very artificiality of decadence is 'a way of being true to nature'; for if the classic values are not found in life, then neither should they be expected in literary representations of that life.

Although Symons notes a 'spiritual and moral perversity', as indicative of a decadent art, he very deliberately avoids any explicit indication of what such perversity consists in, and thus he is able to keep the *frisson* of the word when it is used to connote moral disapprobation, whilst not expressing himself any such disapprobation, so that perversity can be read as a merely aesthetic judgement. Where other writers had

repeatedly emphasised that the treatment of sex and sexuality was what bothered them, Symons — perhaps because *Harper's* was a *family* magazine — avoids specifying the nature of perversity. Because he does not state the grounds for this assertion, he need not state an unambiguously moral position either. Decadence may be a disease, but it is nonetheless beautiful and interesting. Under these vague terms, he is able to avoid the knee-jerk rejection of decadence as a literary/cultural term.

For Symons in the *Harper's* article, decadence is the word which describes *fin-de-siècle* literature as a whole. But within decadence there are subdivisions: there are the Impressionists who seek '*la vraie vérité*' through the appeal to the senses; and the Symbolists, whose appeal is more spiritual. In both cases, however, decadence is to be identified through style rather than content, so that it can be seen as a rejection not of conventional morality, but of conventional grammar. The link made by traditional criticism between conduct and language practice is not stated here, enabling Symons to avoid the outright condemnation of decadence by avoiding any kind of moral declaration. Later, when he had ceased to use the word with approval, in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, he made the relationship between decadent personality and decadent style far more explicit:

It pleased some young men in various countries to call themselves Decadents, with all the thrill of unsatisfied virtue masquerading as uncomprehended vice. As a matter of fact, the term is in its place only when applied to style; to that ingenious deformation of the language ... which can be compared with what we are accustomed to call the Greek and Latin of the Decadence. No doubt perversity of form and perversity of matter were often found together, and, among the lesser men especially, experiment was carried far, not only in the direction of style. ... Nothing, not even conventional virtue, is so provincial as conventional vice; and the desire to 'bewilder the middle-classes' is itself middle-class.³⁴

That connection remains unstated in the earlier formation of the meaning of decadence.

On the other hand, Symons does name without disapproval a number of writers as decadents, including Walter Pater, who may not have been pleased by the designation, and Paul Verlaine, whose inclusion is unlikely to have pleased the magazine's audience, since his life was an infamous scandal after his imprisonment for the attempted murder of his then lover, Arthur Rimbaud, in 1873.³⁵ Symons does not

say much about Verlaine's turbulent past, concentrating on his poetry instead, and he thereby silently undoes the artist/text homology. If Verlaine's appearance in this context is subversive at all, it is very subtly so — an inclusion to be decoded by the cognoscenti rather than an overtly subversive gesture at the wider audience.

When Symons does deal with personality as a decadent feature, he does so in the fictional character of J. K. Huysmans's Des Esseintes, the 'hero' of *A rebours* [*Against Nature*]. Des Esseintes is described as the typical decadent: 'an effeminate, over-civilized, deliberately abnormal creature who is the last product of our society: partly the father, partly the offspring of the perverse art that he adores' ('The Decadent Movement', p. 866). But, as R. K. R. Thornton insists, Des Esseintes is not real; indeed he is written as parody.³⁶ His excesses are an ironic textbook of decadence rather than a factual description of what any decadent writer ever actually did: the novel describes an attitude, not a real person.³⁷ Still, it is the fictional excess of Des Esseintes rather than the 'real excesses' of Verlaine which stands, in Symons's definition of decadence, as the exemplar of the decadent personality — the fiction represents the reality. His insistence on the artificiality as the real condition of contemporary life naturalises both artificial modes of representation (style) and the representation of the artificial as the real — fictional characters represent real personalities, and the fine line between art and life is forever being crossed.

When Symons finally defines decadence, however, he insists on the seriousness of the artificial. Writing of Verlaine, he produces his central statement of the meaning of decadent art in its ideal form (where other writers could not even imagine an ideal form of decadence): 'To fix the last fine shade, the quintessence of things; to fix it fleetingly, to be a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul: that is the ideal of Decadence' ('The Decadent Movement', p. 862). The echo of Pater's 'Conclusion' to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* is unmistakable. This is, moreover, about as far as it is possible to get from the Arnoldian ideal of seeing life steadily and whole. Symons reserves his highest praise for an art which makes emotion its central feature; which makes those emotions even more than usually

transient. This is an art whose viewpoint is fluctuating, and whose expression is the 'voice' (ready to be whipped away on the wind) of a soul — which is nothing if not intangible. This is not a soul which is easily 'read off'. Symons's article celebrates the difficulty of decadence and sees in difficulty a supreme and sometimes ideal artifice.

There was no consensus on the meaning of decadence in the 1890s, except that decadent works were somehow different from works which were not decadent. It was a gamey flavour which excited either outrage or admiration, with very little in between. *Punch*, which ran a series entitled 'Our Decadents' throughout 1894, could not quite decide on the precise features of what it parodied: was decadence a matter of poor critical judgement in artistic matters, in which style and substance could not be adequately ascertained, as with a cartoon produced in July, 1894 (Figure 2)? Or was it an idle, effete attitude in life, as in the meeting of two decadents in October, 1894, where Archie complained to Algy that he had suffered from insomnia 'every afternoon for a week' (Figure 3).³⁸ The consistently languid attitudes of 'Our Decadents' at least implied that decadent art sapped productive masculine vitality. There was, however, an agreement that the style was ornate and difficult — a matter either for praise or blame depending on point of view; and that this difficulty arose because decadent writers did not believe in the possibility of the Arnoldian ideal of seeing life steadily and whole.

Traditional critics continued to value the old standards, and continued to read the work as the index of the artist's personality in an equation in which life and art could not be separated. This is the basis of Wilde's brief definition of decadence in 'The Decay of Lying', which depends for its witty effect on the invocation of such critical norms. In the dialogue, Vivian insists that, contrary to conventional wisdom, art is more important, significant and real than life. Reading from his article, he tells Cyril:

Art begins with abstract decoration, with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent. This is the first stage. Then Life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be admitted into the charmed circle. Art takes Life as part of her rough material, recreates it and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment. The third stage is when Life gets the upper hand, and drives art out into the wilderness. This is the true decadence, and it is from this that we are now suffering.³⁹

What Wilde adds to decadence in English literature in the 1890s is wit and playfulness. In this definition, it is the standard (where art is supposed to serve moral life) not its 'perversion' (where art is irrelevant to life, moral or otherwise) in which decadence is located. It is an attitude which overturns the hierarchy of seriousness and triviality. Like satire, decadence invokes the norm or the ideal. But it does so in order to subvert rather than to reinforce their potency.

What is clear is that decadence is a matter of overflowing boundaries, transgressing the limits of convention, wherever convention is to be found. As such, it is a matter of content as well as form, of substance as well as style. It is also implicitly performative, requiring an act of recognition by the reader/viewer that the writer/artist is connected to his textual practice. The precise nature of decadence is not to be consistent. Established codes of language, culture, conduct and lifestyle are threatened either by the excessive exposure of their assumptions or through the deliberate breaking of those codes. Once the limit has been transgressed, in Foucault's terms, it closes up over the rupture; or the limit is itself pushed on to a new position, awaiting further transgressions.

The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows. ... Transgression ... is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside ... Rather their relationship takes the form of a spiral which no infraction can exhaust.⁴⁰

In literature, the decadent transgression of limits is a textual practice which overflows the limits of the text itself, and has meaning in the world beyond the text. As such, decadence can never be 'cleansed of normative shadings'. Almost the whole of its existence takes place in the interplay between the normal and the perverse, the standard and the deviation: decadence is parergonal and liminal. It is, as it were, a contaminating and contaminated term, which always resists the limitations of definition. It is profoundly indeterminate, which is how it is creative and subversive.

The insistence in the mainstream press that decadence resided in sexual explicitness suggests that the primary locus of its subversive force was to be found in versions of sexuality which ran counter to conventional, socially sanctioned conduct; heterosexual promiscuity or (after the Wilde trials) any articulation of same-sex desires provided one of the possible contents of a decadent art. The perversion of the standard was further deemed to have been dramatised by certain textual practices. In the New Woman Fiction of the 1890s, it was straight-talking, speaking unmentionable things loudly and clearly, which was decadent, since 'such things' were subjects on which ladies would be ignorant, or at least reticent. On the other hand, a man who did not talk straight, who used a jewelled, arcane vocabulary and a complex syntactical organisation, disrupted the masculine ideals of sincerity and restraint by taking a virtually sensual pleasure in periphrasis. Ideals in art were gendered, as Arthur Waugh's essay, 'Reticence in Literature', which appeared in the first volume of *The Yellow Book* in 1894, shows:

There is all the difference in the world between drawing life as we find it, sternly and relentlessly, surveying it all the while from outside with the calm, unflinching gaze of criticism, and, on the other hand, yielding ourselves to the warmth and colour of its excesses, losing our judgement in the ecstasies of the joy of life, becoming, in a word, effeminate. ... It is unmanly, it is effeminate, it is inartistic to gloat over our pleasure, to revel in immoderation.⁴¹

And consequently, if decadence marked a fall from an ideal standard in art, it implied also a fall from an ideal standard of gender, of conduct, of the artistic personality. It resides therefore in a space *between*: between the terms of many hierarchised binary oppositions, and in particular between life and art, rendering the boundary between sexualities and textualities the site of its multiple transgressions.

In this way, decadent art dramatises the rhetorical trope of *prosopopoeia*, which, as J. Hillis Miller shows in his book *Versions of Pygmalion*, is the trope of word becoming flesh, and vice versa, flesh becoming word, in a series of transgressions of the boundary which is supposed to separate art from life. The metamorphosis comes about, according to Miller, through the 'wish' of the artist or the viewer.⁴² It disrupts the ideality of art — its fixity and its stability — by making art

liable to the flux and changes of life. And it destroys life by taking away the motion which defines it. The figure of *prosopopoeia* is one which recurs in all kinds of decadent writing. In Huysmans's *A rebours* for example, Des Esseintes has a tortoise encrusted with gold and precious jewels to make it into a living work of art: but the unfortunate tortoise dies under the strain. In many of Wilde's works, the confusion of life and art (Dorian Gray's portrait, 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.', 'The Happy Prince') is focused on the attractions of artistic perfection, and the contamination of art by life in the crossing of the boundary between them. The same is true of his poem *Charmides*, in which there is a deliberate violation of the lines between life and art, and between sacred and profane. For Symons, the figure of the dancer is attractive precisely because she confuses the issue of the distinction between life and art. In Yeats's words, 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?' The dancer is, for Symons, a figure of recurring *prosopopoeia*. Vernon Lee's novel, *Miss Brown* (1884), is read as a version of Pygmalion by Richard Jenkyns; Miss Brown is constantly compared to a statue, and Walter Hamlin views himself as Miss Brown's Pygmalion.⁴³ Moreover, her stories of haunting play on the boundaries between life and death and life and art. Deliberately to reach out and touch the artistic body or its substitutes, the religious body, the ghost or the dancer, is to insist on the connection between what Patricia Flanagan Behrendt identifies as eros and aesthetics.⁴⁴ It is to draw together issues of gender and sexuality in the world of art: *prosopopoeia* is one of the rhetorical figures which identifies decadence.

Notes

¹ Michel Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression,' in Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 33-34.

² Richard Gilman in *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet*, a book dedicated to defining the term, says at the outset of his book that 'it may turn out to be impossible to *define* decadence.' And he comments at the end of the book that the word decadence is 'an epithet, neither more nor less, and this should alert us at least to the possibility that there is nothing to which it actually and legitimately

applies.' See *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1979), p. 9, p. 158.

³ The quotations are as follows:

1549 *Compl. Scot* vii, 71. My triumphant stait is succumbit in decadens.

1623 Favine, *Theat Hon*, II, xii, 177. Forewarning of the entire decadence of the kingdom.

1649 Drum of Hawth, *Poems*, 185. Doth in decadens fall and slack remain.

1734 *North Exam*, II, v, § 144, (1740), 406. The Decadence of all he had hoped, or could hope for, in this world.

1762 Goldsm, *Cit W* XI. Every day produces some pathetic exclamation upon the decadence of taste and genius.

1815 Scott, *Guy M.* ii. The old castle where the family lived in their decadence.

⁴ [The decadent has no ideas. He does not want any. He prefers words. It is up to the reader to understand and to put ideas into the words. The reader generally refuses to do this. Hence the decadent's scorn for the reader.] (My translation)

⁵ See R. K. R. Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), pp. 15-33. For other discussions of the French tradition in English formations of decadence see: Alfred Edward Carpenter, *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature, 1830-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950); Barbara Charlesworth, *Dark Passages: The Decadent Consciousness in Victorian Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965); Patricia Clements, *Baudelaire and the English Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Jennifer Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers: Decadence in France, 1870-1914* (London and New York: Quartet, 1986). For a discussion of Paul Verlaine's relationship with the decadent movement in France, see Philip Stephan, *Paul Verlaine and the Decadence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974).

⁶ Charles Baudelaire, 'Further Notes on Edgar Poe,' in P. E. Charvet (trans. and ed.), *Selected Writings on Art and Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 188.

⁷ This would be no surprise to anyone who had read Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857). In his poetry, Baudelaire celebrated artificial scent, make-up and costume as essential components in the making of the truly feminine woman.

⁸ Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life' in Charvet (ed.), *Selected Writings*, pp. 390-435, p. 400.

⁹ Théophile Gautier, 'Charles Baudelaire', *L'Univers illustré*, March and April, 1868; reprinted as the Introduction to *Les Fleurs du mal* for the first collected edition of Baudelaire's works, also in 1868; reprinted in Claude-Marie Senninger (ed.), *Baudelaire par Théophile Gautier* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1986), p. 124. Translation from the English translation of Max Nordau, *Degeneration* [German, 1892, English translation, 1895], introduced by George L. Mosse, facsimile edition (London and Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 299.

¹⁰ Thais E. Morgan, 'Perverse Male Bodies: Simeon Solomon and Algernon Charles Swinburne' in Peter Horne and Reina Lewis (eds), *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 61-85, p. 61.

¹¹ Gautier, 'Charles Baudelaire', op. cit., p. 125. Translation, Nordau, op. cit., p. 299.

¹² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 90.

¹³ All sorts of political ideologies, Sedgwick argues, suggest that there is 'a peculiarly close, though never precisely defined, affinity between same-sex desire and some historical condition of moribundity, called 'decadence', to which not individuals or minorities, but whole civilisations are subject.' See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 128.

¹⁴ [John Morley], 'Editor', 'Mr Pater's Essays', *Fortnightly Review*, 19 (April, 1873), 469-77; reprinted in R. M. Seiler (ed.) *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 64.

¹⁵ Symonds commented in the *Academy* for 15 March 1873: 'Of Mr. Pater's two French studies, that on du Bellay, in whom he sees "the subtle and delicate sweetness which belong to a refined and comely decadence," is perhaps the most interesting. Like Théophile Gautier, and like Baudelaire, Mr. Pater has a sympathetic feeling for the beauty of autumn and decay. He is not even insensible to what may be called the fascination of corruption.' See J. A. Symonds, Review of Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, *Academy* 4 (March, 1873), 103-105; reprinted in R. M. Seiler (ed.), *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 58-61, p. 59.

¹⁶ In the 1893 edition of *The Renaissance*, this word was altered to 'earnest', that Victorian virtue which links 'seriousness' with 'sincerity' and which, of course, Wilde satirised in the title of his play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

¹⁷ Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: William Heinemann, 1899), p. 8.

¹⁸ Ian Fletcher, 'The Little Magazines' in Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (eds), *Decadence and the 1890s*, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, 17 (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), pp. 174-206, p. 189. The little magazines were not, however, by any means always in favour of decadence. As R. K. R. Thornton notes, Arthur Waugh's essay, 'Reticence in Literature' which appeared in *The Yellow Book*, 1 (1894), 201-219 was violently anti-decadent, despite its publication in what appeared to be virtually the official organ of decadence. See Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), p. 60.

¹⁹ Laurel Brake notes the large circulation of the magazine and speculates about the extent to which decadence is a word with wide circulation, meaning that it would have paid *Harper's* to include some discussion of it. The precise history of how Symons's article came to be commissioned and published is now lost, so the motives for its inclusion can only be guessed at. See Laurel Brake, 'Harper's New Monthly Magazine: American Censorship, European Decadence, and the Periodicals Market,' in *Subjugated Knowledges: Journalism, Gender and Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 104-124.

²⁰ [Rev. W. F. Barry], 'Realism and Decadence in French Fiction', *Quarterly Review*, 171 (July 1890), 57-90; [Rev. W. F. Barry], 'The French Decadence', *Quarterly Review*, 174 (April, 1892), 479-504. The anonymous author is identified by Linda Dowling in *Aestheticism and Decadence: A Selective Annotated Bibliography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

²¹ The article appeared in 1892, and Maupassant did not die until 1893. But it was well known that his mental health had broken down as early as 1889 as the result of syphilis; during the breakdown he had tried to kill himself. Barry's article speaks of Maupassant in the past tense, as if in acknowledgement that he was already dead, at least as a functioning writer.

²² 'A strange, complex, calculated and obscure vocabulary.' (my translation)

²³ Thomas Bradfield, 'A Dominant Note of Some Recent Fiction,' *Westminster Review*, 142 (1894), 537-545, p. 537. This remark might be compared with Gautier's favourable view of Baudelaire's decadence, expressed in a language 'mottled with the greenness of decomposition, and, as it were, gamey [*faisandée*].' See Gautier, quoted in Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 299.

²⁴ James Ashcroft Noble, 'The Sexuality of Fiction', *Contemporary Review*, 67 (1895), 490-498, p. 493.

²⁵ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 166.

²⁶ William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel, 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 20-29.

²⁷ Hugh E. M. Stutfield, "'Tommyrotics'", *Blackwood's Magazine* 157 (Jan-June, 1895), 833-845, p. 834.

²⁸ Wilde is never explicitly mentioned in this article, but as the quotation suggests, it is of Wilde that Stutfield is thinking in a series of half-quotations and allusions. In characterising decadence as rebellion, he may well have been thinking of 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (1891), where Wilde had argued that 'Disobedience ... is man's original virtue,' and that socialism would enable mankind to 'be thyself'. There are also references to the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891), which had dissociated art from morality, and to 'Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Very Young' in which Wilde had written: 'Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others.' (See Merlin Holland (ed.), *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* [Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994] p. 1176, p. 1179, p. 17, p. 1244). Both *Dorian Gray* and the epigrams, which had first appeared in *The Chameleon* in 1894, had featured large at Wilde's trials; and the exchanges over them had been extensively reported. See Jonathan Goodman, *The Oscar Wilde File* (London: Allison and Busby, 1990); H. Montgomery Hyde, *Oscar Wilde: Famous Trials 7*, second edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962).

²⁹ Harry Quilter, 'The Gospel of Intensity', *Contemporary Review*, 67 (Jan-June, 1895), 761-82, p. 763).

³⁰ Richard Le Gallienne, Review of John Gray's *Silverpoints* (March, 1893), reprinted in *Retrospective Reviews: A Literary Log*, 2 volumes (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1896), Volume 1, pp. 229-232, p. 229.

³¹ Richard Le Gallienne, 'Considerations Suggested by Mr. Churton Collins's "Illustrations of Tennyson"', *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, 7 (1892), 77-83, p. 81.

³² Lionel Johnson, 'A Note Upon the Practice and Theory of Verse at the Present Time Obtaining in France', *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, 6 (1891), 61-66, p. 61.

³³ Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 87 (November, 1893), 858-868, p. 858.

³⁴ Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: William Heinemann, 1899), p. 8.

³⁵ In *Subjugated Knowledges*, Laurel Brake notes the scholarly speculation that the initially very warm relationship between Symons and Pater had cooled after 1890. She writes: 'It is altogether possible that Symons' inclusion of Pater in the catalogue of English decadents, and his unmistakable association of Pater's work with that of the French Decadents kindled Pater's fear of homophobia, and anger at Symons for construing his work as part of this dangerous cultural formation.' (p. 121) The inclusion of Verlaine in the list may be easier to understand, given that a mainstream audience is unlikely to have been completely *au fait* with the scandals of Verlaine's life, and unless they were informed by the article, they need never have known.

³⁶ R. K. R. Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, pp. 21-25.

³⁷ The attitude is nonetheless important. Parodies played a large part in defining decadence. And *A rebours* in particular is significant because it provided as source for Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*; and when Wilde came to trial, the excesses which Dorian had learned from Des Esseintes were ascribed to the decadent personality of Wilde himself.

³⁸ See *Punch*, 7 June, 1894, p. 6; *Punch*, 27 October, 1894, p. 203.

³⁹ Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying' [first published in *The Nineteenth Century*, January 1889], reprinted with alterations in *Intentions* (London: Heinemann and Balestrier, 1891), p. 18.

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression', op. cit., pp. 34-5.

⁴¹ Arthur Waugh, 'Reticence in Literature', *The Yellow Book*, 1 (1894), 201-219, p. 209.

⁴² See J. Hillis Miller, *Versions of Pygmalion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 1-12.

⁴³ Richard Jenkyns, *Dignity and Decadence: Victorian Art and the Classical Inheritance* (London: Fontana Press, 1992), p. 134.

⁴⁴ See Patricia Flanagan Behrendt, *Oscar Wilde: Eros and Aesthetics* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

Chapter Three

‘Style, not sincerity’: Wilde’s Early Poems

One of the signs of the Decadence of a literature, one of the factors of its decadent condition indeed, is this — that new authors attach themselves to the poetic expression the founders of a literature have flowered into, which may be *learned* by a sensitive person to the neglect of an inward poetic life.¹

It is as if two twin and complementary languages were born at once from the same central source: one existing entirely in its naivety, the other within parody; one existing solely for the reader’s eyes, the other moving from the reader’s simple-minded fascination to the easy tricks of the writer. But in actuality, these two languages are more than simply contemporaneous; they lie within each other, share the same dwelling, constantly intertwine, forming a single verbal web, and, as it were, a forked language that turns against itself from within, destroying itself in its own body, poisonous in its very density.²

I make no charge; but to my mind to pose as a thing is as bad as to be it.³

An exchange between Cecily Cardew and Gwendolen Fairfax in *The Importance of Being Earnest* provides the starting point for this discussion. The two women are quarrelling over the ‘ownership’ of the fictitious Ernest:

Cecily: Do you suggest, Miss Fairfax, that I entrapped Ernest into an engagement? How dare you? This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners. When I see a spade I call it a spade.

Gwendolen (*satirically*): I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different.⁴

The Importance of Being Earnest is certainly Wilde’s most famous work, and commentators discover that a great many meanings accrue to it. For Regenia Gagnier, it is a critique of the ruling classes;⁵ for Owen Dudley Edwards, it represents a world where sexual roles are reversed with Gwendolen and Cecily taking on the masculine attributes abdicated by the respective suitors;⁶ and for Jonathan Dollimore, the play represents a complex matrix of class and gender subversion.

In his commentary on this passage in his book *Sexual Dissidence*, Dollimore suggests that Gwendolen’s response ‘shows ... that there may be more to snobbery than ignorant condescension’. He argues that she ‘repudiates the implied opposition’

between the high ground of straightforward, straight-talking sincerity and the low ground of the sophisticated but shallow; and ‘kicks Cecily straight back into the domain of class, “the social sphere”’.⁷ Whilst Dollimore is certainly right to identify social class as the basis of Gwendolen’s ‘put-down’ of Cecily’s pose of naturalness, it is not only in terms of class that she is snubbed. The class to which Gwendolen denies her adversary access is the class of those who can talk around a subject, paraphrase it, allude to it without every actually stating anything in a straightforward way. Cecily, that is, is not so artistic — or, so artificial — as Gwendolen.

In other words, Cecily does not have access to the code in which Gwendolen speaks. The quoted passage is a microcosm of the play as a whole, where the audience is also denied access to transparent meaning by the codes of the play, dramatised in the metaphorical verb ‘to bunbury’, a polyvalent term which means whatever the bunburyist wishes it to mean. As Jeffrey Weeks argues, the play is ‘basically about two men who elaborately court females as a cover for bunburying, illicit pleasures which, by extension, can easily be seen as homosexual in implication.’⁸ To speak out, to call a spade a spade, is to subscribe to social norms: what can be spoken aloud, publicised, is necessarily acceptable to the world at large. To talk around a subject, to give it a code, to make a point of not saying it straight out, is to suggest that the thing which is not spoken is covert, forbidden, and repressed in and by a language which could, if it chose, in the right context, make everything clear. Such a language practice creates coteries of those who are ‘in the know’, who can read the code; and it deliberately excludes others who are not privy to the secret.

In this respect, Wilde’s language practice in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and, indeed, as we shall see, in his earlier works, enacts the meanings of both camp and decadence. When Susan Sontag defined ‘camp’, it was as an ‘unnatural sensibility,’ a pose of ‘artifice and exaggeration’; ‘camp is esoteric — something of a private code’.⁹ Whilst camp is a mode in which the content of art is very important, it is also on the side of stylisation, and is interested in possible contrasts between content and form; it is necessarily socially disengaged and apolitical (Sontag, pp. 277-79):

To camp is a mode of seduction — one which employs flamboyant mannerisms, susceptible of a double interpretation: gestures full of duplicity with a witty meaning for the cognoscenti, and another, more impersonal, for outsiders. ... Behind the 'straight' public sense in which something can be taken, one has found a private zany experience of the thing. (Sontag, p. 281)

Sontag identifies the figure of the dandy as the nineteenth-century exponent of camp, the dandy being a man who plays the role of himself, acts a stylised masculinity, and makes his life into art (Sontag, p. 288). And there is a strong identification of camp with homosexuality as 'a gesture of self-legitimation' in which the aesthetic sense replaces morality as the foundation of social value: 'Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralises moral indignation, sponsors playfulness' (Sontag, p. 290).

This definition of camp maps onto some nineteenth-century definitions of decadence as well. Selwyn Image's view that Pater's prose was something to be kept 'amongst the *secreta*' implies the private code of the cognoscenti.¹⁰ Nordau's *Degeneration*, which took Wilde as a chief specimen of decline and decadence in England, noted that decadent writings all share 'a contempt for traditional views of custom and morality'.¹¹ He also argued that degenerate literary taste favoured obscurity over clarity (Nordau, p. 13). In poetry, rather than any seeing of life steadily and whole, decadence is exhibited in a fragmented poetic style where 'completely disconnected nouns and adjectives ... suggest each other, either through a senseless meandering by way of associated ideas, or through a similarity of sound' (Nordau, p. 126). The symptom of the decadent (male) artist is that he is merely acting the part of himself, and acting it through an artistic form which valorises disintegration rather than wholeness; and the whole purpose of this wilful display is attention-seeking:

The common feature in all these male specimens [of degeneracy] is that they do not express their real idiosyncrasies, but try to present something that they are not. They are not content to show their natural figure, nor even to supplement it by legitimate accessories, in harmony with the type to which they approximate, but they seek to model themselves after some artistic pattern which has no affinity with their own nature, or is even antithetical to it. Nor do they ... limit themselves to one pattern, but copy several at once, which jar with one another. Thus we get set heads on shoulders not belonging to them ... The impression is that of a masked festival, where all are in disguises, and with heads too in character. ... Every single figure strives visibly by some singularity in outline, set, cut, or colour, to startle attention violently, and imperiously to detain it. (Nordau, p. 9)

Decadent art is matter of pose, rather than sincerity, of the fragmented inscription of the self, rather than wholeness, of violent attention-seeking rather than silent conformity. What such behaviour and the art it produces disrupt are stable conceptions of middle-class masculinity within a society which depended on such conceptions for its sense of itself.

Wilde did not talk straight either in his writings or in his life. His own speech was artificially intoned as one audience member for his American lecture tour has recorded.¹² And as W. B. Yeats remembered, Wilde appeared to have rehearsed his conversation, speaking perfect sentences in modulated tones.¹³ He spoke as if he were acting the part of himself, as if he were quite literally turning his life into art, making nature into artifice. That his personality was identifiable as a pose is highly significant in any understanding of the reception of his work, in a context where sincerity was identified with the straightforward, with clear seeing and with clarity of expression, and was accorded high value in critical terms.¹⁴ In acting his life as if it were art, Wilde disrupted the ideal of artistic stability; he dramatised the meaning of decadence by textualising his life. His poetry enacts not pure emotion, but the self-conscious expression of emotion which Lionel Johnson identifies with decadence where 'thought thinks upon itself, and ... emotions become entangled with the consciousness of them.'¹⁵

In refusing sincerity as a benchmark for either his conduct or his writing, Wilde disturbed the ideology of masculine gender. When an ideology is confident in itself it needs no statement. But when Wilde appeared in London at the end of the 1870s, and when he published his first volume of *Poems* in 1881, the ideology of the separate spheres, as we have already noted, was certainly under threat. The debates about the Married Woman's Property Act (passed in 1882, enacted in 1883) were in full flow; the Contagious Diseases Acts were the subject of a vigorous feminist campaign; and there were debates about higher education for women. As Elaine Showalter suggests, the 1880s was a turbulent decade in which all kinds of certainties — of class, race and

gender — were being questioned.¹⁶ If the understanding of Woman, her place in society, in the world of work, in culture and in politics, was being questioned, it is an obvious corollary that the meaning of Man and masculinity were also sites of contestation. The word 'decadence' was not yet widespread in literary-critical circles. Wilde, indeed, was known as an aesthete, rather than a decadent in the 1880s. Nonetheless, the rhetoric in which decadence was to be defined in the following decade was in the process of formation during the earlier period. Aestheticism shared much with decadence, not least that it too seemed to call the boundaries of gender definition into question.

A number of recent commentators have discussed what might be called the Man Question. James Eli Adams and Ed Cohen, following different routes, have both reached the conclusion that the meaning of masculinity in the nineteenth century was never as confident of its own grounds as the rhetoric in which it discussed itself implied. Indeed, the existence of any rhetoric of masculinity suggests that masculinity was no more a secure gendered identity than femininity: as James Eli Adams puts it, 'the more emphatically [a] gendered distinction is affirmed, ... the more overtly problematic it becomes'.¹⁷ Cohen suggests that masculinity was defined by middle-class values; but because 'middle class' is a relational and therefore conditional designation, the siting of masculinity in this particular class was bound to lead to contestation. In *Talk on the Wilde Side*, he shows that the definition of middle-class values were dependent on (political and social) power, individuality within community, and male gender. And he goes on to suggest that restraint marked ideal class conduct, and as such, the morality which was based on restraint was not a divine mandate, but a political construction open to adaptation and change, though, of course, such change was to be vigorously opposed.¹⁸ Just as importantly, Adams suggests that there was always an essential tension between an ideal masculinity of restraint or reserve, and the need to *show* overtly that one is indeed reserved. He argues that the Victorian concept of the gentleman was a matter of spectacle, whilst simultaneously being ideally a merely conventional presence which called no attention to itself. 'Reserve is an unexpectedly

significant attribute, since it functions only in a social context. One can be quiet in solitude, but reserve must be displayed: it characterises a subject in its relation to an audience' (Adams, p. 189).

Thus, whilst on the one hand, what it meant to be a man was simple and transparent, it was also, on the other hand, complex and unknowable. Masculinity meant at once that one was serious, sincere, authentic and mature, with one's every action an index of a true self:¹⁹ and it also meant that one was merely *acting* out these attributes. In Wilde's *Poems* of 1881, the emphasis is on the *acting* of the roles of manhood, rather than on *being* masculine. The critics noted that what they were reading was a series of poses, and for this they condemned both the poems and their author.

The Lyric *Poems*²⁰ of 1881

The *Poems* which Wilde published in 1881 at in his own expense with David Bogue, were not his first foray into print. As Richard Ellmann notes, about half the poems subsequently printed in this volume had previously appeared in various University magazines in Oxford and Dublin.²¹ He had also won the Newdigate Prize for Poetry in 1878 for his poem *Ravenna* (which was not included in the 1881 volume), a poem very much aware of its own status as commodity,²² and written for the purpose of winning the prize, rather than as a directly self-expressive piece.²³ The poem fictionalises the circumstances of Wilde's journey to Ravenna. He claims to have entered the city on horseback, when, as Ellmann says, 'a train was actually the mode of transport'.²⁴ He also falsifies his age, claiming to be 'one who scarce has seen / Some twenty summers cast their doublets green' (14), when he was actually nearly 23 years old.

These small details perhaps did not matter. *Ravenna*, as a candidate for a quasi-academic prize, depended less on an ideal of sincerity than on the requirement to demonstrate knowledge and learning. As such, the poem is a compendium of the city's literary history spiced with references to the English poetic tradition, and with multiple allusions to the English Romantics which frankly border on plagiarism.²⁵ It is a declamatory poem, written as a series of dramatic poses, which apostrophise the city as the repository of literary wisdom and as an archaic (yet nonetheless attractive) vision of an aristocratic past, contrasted favourably with the new democracy upon which the Italian state was supposedly founded.

One might expect that Wilde would have been only too anxious to leave behind the 'bad faith' of this avowedly insincere prize poem. What is significant about however, is that actually set the agenda for many of the tendencies of the 1881 volume. As the reviewer for *The Saturday Review* for 23 July, 1881 noted, the poetry suffered from its imitation of greater poets such as Tennyson, Swinburne, Arnold and Rossetti. He went on to complain:

The great fault of all such writing as this is the want of literary sincerity it displays. ... Worse than [the] profuse and careless imagery is the sensual and ignoble tone which deforms a large proportion of the poems, and for which the

plea of youth is scarcely an excuse. ... The book is not without traces of cleverness, but is marred everywhere by imitation, insincerity and bad taste.²⁶

This one passage contains most of the major criticisms levelled against Wilde's writing and personality for the rest of his career. He is accused of imitation (plagiarism), insincerity (posing or imposture) and bad taste (obscenity). Nor is he in full artistic control of his material which is marred by 'profuse and careless imagery'. These criticisms mark the extent of Wilde's fall from masculine cultural ideals: ideals of artistic sincerity, which depends, in Ruskin's words on the 'expression of the spirits of great men'; and restraint or reserve of form and content, by which manliness is defined. The critics might not yet be calling Wilde decadent, but they are reading him in the complex of associations by which decadence will eventually be defined.

What was it about *Poems* that provoked the critics? There were a number of features which caused critical unease, in which the word 'insincerity' looms large. The poems do not reflect a coherent set of values. From the epigraph poem 'Hélas!' Wilde's poetic persona rejects the 'depth model'²⁷ of personality favoured by the critical standards of Arnold. In this poem the poetic voice describes itself as a palimpsest: 'Methinks my life is a twice-written scroll' (21). Its whole existence is taken up with 'drifting' with the winds, for which privilege it has renounced 'austere control.' The poem refuses to decide whether a 'drifting' existence is tragedy or pleasure. It might lead to damnation: but it also has the sweetness of the 'honey of romance.' Thus the tone is set for the volume. Contradictory positions are taken up, as it were, simultaneously. The poet refuses to make a choice between irreconcilable opposites. Instead he takes pleasure in the austerity and control of one stable version of the world, as well as in the flux and inconsistency of its opposite.

This is signalled in the volume by the organisation of the poems. The volume is divided into different headings; short lyrics (or dramatic lyrics) are placed together under section titles such as *Eleutheria*, *Rosa Mystica*, *Wind Flowers*, *Flowers of Gold*, *Impressions de Théâtre*, and *The Fourth Movement*. Interspersed between these sections of short poems, there are longer more declamatory verses: 'The Garden of

Eros', 'The Burden of Itys', 'Charmides', 'Panthea' and 'Humanitad'. Each section heading refers, if sometimes obliquely, to the content of the poems it contains. Thus *Eleutheria*, meaning 'a Miltonic swell of diction' (OED), contains poems which are political in thrust, dealing mostly with republican and Protestant ideas. The second section, *Rosa Mystica*, evokes various Roman Catholic themes, describes visits to Italy, refers to Dante and to ideal women on the model of the Virgin Mary. The allegiance represented by the poems in *Wind Flowers*, as the title itself might suggest, is rather more difficult to pin down. Here are to be found poems about England, London and Oxford in particular; there is the mythic story of a seed from ancient Egypt which is planted in England and which foretells 'How London from its pinnacle must fall' (108), but which proclaims that art lasts forever. There is a song sung by Paris, as he waits for Helen to elope with him, which owes much to Tennyson's *Mariana*, though the gender roles are reversed, and it is the male lover who fears his mistress 'will not come' (109). There is the hopelessness of a nymph singing the praises of Endymion's physical perfection in death: there is an evocation of the poet's ideal but fatal woman; and a song ('Chanson') of death and suicide. The links between the poems in *Flowers of Gold* and *The Fourth Movement* are similarly elusive. Only the theatrical sonnets of *Impressions de Théâtre*, praising the artistic perfection of Sarah Bernhardt, Ellen Terry and Henry Irving, in the roles they play as actors, make a clear link between poems and section heading.

Within specific sections, the poems do not, however, necessarily enact consistent positions. Most of the poems in *Eleutheria*, for example, are republican in tone,²⁸ paying tribute to Milton's politics and poetics, as well as to Milton's more recent admirers; and they make Oliver Cromwell their hero. They celebrate democracy and violent rebellion against autocracy. So, 'To Milton' is at once a tribute to Milton, and to Wordsworth, making allusion to Wordsworth's sonnet, 'London, 1802', 'Milton, thou shouldst be living at this hour,' in its opening lines: 'Milton! I think thy spirit hath passed away / From these white cliffs and high-embattled towers' (32). Or, again, Wilde's 'Sonnet: On the Massacre of the Christians in Bulgaria' is a titular allusion to

Milton's 'On the Late Bloody Massacre in Piedmont', 'Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered Saints, whose bones / Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold.' It is surprising then, to find, that two poems further in to the section, Wilde's poetic persona has begun to reject his earlier political allegiance in favour of the aesthetic (though not the ethical) virtues of tyranny in a sonnet entitled 'Libertatis Sacra Fames'. Although the poet has been 'nurtured in democracy', he concludes that the 'rule of One' is better than 'to let the clamorous demagogues betray / Our freedoms with the kiss of anarchy.' Monarchy or tyranny at least protect 'Arts, Culture, Reverence, Honour'; and revolt against monarchy is therefore 'no right cause. The final poem of the section, 'Theoretikos', then speaks of complete withdrawal from all political, ethical or religious commitment. A retreat into art without any predetermined commitment is the final position of this section:

... in dreams of Art
And loftiest culture I would stand apart,
Neither for God, nor for his enemies. (37)

The poems, that is, are consistent, only in the sense that they are always locked into a dialectic, in which the poet refuses to choose between opposing philosophical, artistic and religious values.

Similarly, the poems of the *Rosa Mystica* section are also unsure of their allegiance. They tell the story of Wilde's journey to Rome, and of his flirtation with Roman Catholicism. In the context of the whole section, this religious uncertainty seems to be a response to the death of a beloved which is spoken in 'Requiescat,' the opening poem of the section. This poem is unusual in Wilde's oeuvre, and he himself did not think it 'very typical of my work,' as he wrote to W. B. Yeats following a request to be allowed to include it an anthology.²⁹ On one level, the poem is the traditional lament of the lover for his dead mistress, and the beauty which has been destroyed by death. And the poem ends with the desolation of the lover who feels that his life as a poet is over now that his inspiration has gone, and his beloved can no longer hear his song:

Peace, Peace, she cannot hear

Lyre or sonnet,
All my life's buried here,
Heap earth upon it. (57)

The poet, that is, has lost the very things which make him a poet, a subject and an audience, so that the lament is as much for himself as for the dead woman.

The poem is atypical of Wilde's work in that it is very 'restrained'. It does have a self-dramatising quality (the poet-figure prostrated by grief), but it is nonetheless very quietly expressed. The short lines of the stanza form (unusual in themselves in the work of a poet whose natural tendency was generally to overspill the metrical limits he imposed on himself) are compressed and largely regular, suggesting the formulaic representation of a painful emotion which is kept under tight expressive control. The poem contains a typical Victorian vision of feminine innocence, in which the whiteness of the beloved's features stand as a direct representation of her inner grace. She is 'natural', not cultural ('Lily-like, white as snow'); and she has no self-consciousness: 'She hardly knew / She was a woman, so / Sweetly she grew'. She becomes a work of art only through the cultural intervention of the poet. But no expansion or analysis is possible in the quiet grief of loss.

The poem was written in response to the death of Wilde's younger sister, Isola, who died aged nine in 1867.³⁰ It is perhaps surprising therefore that the poem borrowed the stanza form of Thomas Hood's poem *The Bridge of Sighs* (1844) which tells the story of a prostitute who commits suicide by throwing herself from Westminster Bridge into the Thames. Writing in 1912, Arthur Ransome commented that the poem, 'like most of Wilde's early melodies, ... is sung to a borrowed lyre, but the thing is so sweet that it seems ungracious to remember its indebtedness to Thomas Hood.' To demonstrate that indebtedness, Ransome quotes a stanza from *The Bridge of Sighs*, and establishes that the metrical echo exists.³¹ What one has here, then, is an evocation of absolute innocence and tragic loss, expressed in a manner which implies loss of innocence. And this dialectical tension continues through the rest of the section.

As the poet journeys towards Rome ('Sonnet: on Approaching Italy'), he does not know whether to laugh or to cry, and in the course of the poem does both: he

laughs with pleasure on reaching the Italian border, and weeps with pain at the present degraded state of the papacy. The poet who wished to be 'Milton's heritor' has now turned apostate to Protestantism, and glories in Catholic iconography; he seeks visions of the Virgin Mary in which his response to her is somewhere between the idolatrous and the profane. The pleasure of Catholicism is, for Wilde, the pleasure of a sensual mysticism, which is, however, less potent than the Paganism which it replaced in Italy. The tone of a poem such as 'Ave Maria Gratia Plena' is difficult to judge. The title takes the words of one of the most important Catholic prayers, the words of the Angel Gabriel to Mary at the Annunciation. But the poem enunciates the poet's disappointment with a manifestation of God which is so chaste and passionless. The Annunciation is compared unfavourably with Zeus's erotic encounters with Danae and Semele. The Wildean persona expects an overwhelming, spectacular vision of God. Semele, 'sickening for love and unappeased desire,' had her consummation in the flames of divine conflagration. Danae was also visited by golden erotic violence. Mary's impregnation is quite literally pale by comparison:

with wondering eyes and heart I stand
 Before the supreme mystery of Love;
 Some kneeling girl with passionless pale face,
 An angel with a lily in hand,
 And over both the white wings of a dove. (60)

The poems, that is, insist on the contrast between Catholicism and Paganism, and yet, at the same time, the two choices are linked by Wilde as matters for aesthetic preference rather than spirituality. The *rituals* of Catholicism are presented in the same colours — purple, red, white and gold — as Pagan ones, but the Christian God manifests Himself only in white; the appeal of both is primarily artistic, with the emphasis on spectacle rather than on faith. Thus, in 'Rome Unvisited', the attitude of the priest at the moment of transubstantiation, his dramatic gesture, is more important than the precise meaning of that gesture; and the pleasure of the poet is in *seeing* the gesture, rather than in partaking in the faith it dramatises:

O joy to see before I die
 The only God-anointed King,
 And hear the silver trumpets ring

A triumph as He passes by!

Or at the brazen-pillared shrine
 Holds high the mystic sacrifice,
 And *shows* his God to *human eyes*
 Beneath the veil of bread and wine. (65, my emphasis)

It is the colours of the papal procession of 'Easter Day' — the white, red and gold — which appeal to the eye, and by extension to the libido.³²

Profane and sacred forms of love are not separated, just as Pagan and Christian are not. In a poem such as 'Vita Nuova,' for example, Wilde alludes to Dante, and to conflation of his love of Beatrice with his love of God. The title means 'New Life', and is a direct allusion to Dante's poem of the same name. 'New life' implies the consummation of the relationship with either God or the beloved. But in the poem, the new life takes place at sunset, and the tone is as Greek as it is Roman (Catholic). The first lines are a camp allusion to the Homeric epithet for the sea ('wine-dark'): 'I stood by the unvintageable sea.' The Golden Age of the fecund Homeric world is compared to a barren present, imaged significantly as bread (metonymically indicated as grain) and wine:

'Alas,' I cried, 'my life is full of pain,
 And who can garner fruit or golden grain
 From these waste fields which travail ceaselessly!
 My nets gaped wide with many a break and flaw,
 Nathless I threw them as my final cast
 Into the sea and waited for the end.
 When lo! a sudden glory, and I saw
 From the black waters of my tortured past
 The argent splendour of white limbs ascend! (71)

The barren soul is made fruitful by the appearance of the divine, but the white limbs here are ambiguous. The metaphors in the poem all point to a Christian solution of the Pagan/Christian dialectic. The fishing metaphor (Christ invited his disciples to become 'fishers of men'), and the bread and wine of the Catholic transubstantiation all point in that direction. But Christ only walked on the water; he did not rise from it, as Aphrodite did. Moreover, the 'argent splendour of white limbs' is an image lacking in propriety if Christ is its subject.³³ This poem takes place, that is, in the decadent space between

sacred and profane loves, and it ends in a consummation which lacks a proper spirituality if the love object is supposed to be Christ.

For Wilde, as Philip K. Cohen has noted, 'love' and 'sin' are virtual synonyms.³⁴ Even the love of God has its erotic charge. And in his visions of the Virgin Mary, such as 'Madonna Mia', Wilde cannot decide between the perfection of her white marble image, or the hope that there is real blood in her marble bosom. The contradictory states of artistic perfection and flesh-and-blood physicality — the place between the ideal and the real — is the site of both pleasure and danger.³⁵ For Wilde, the supposedly stable worlds of art and religion are constantly becoming flesh in the trope of *prosopopoeia*. This is an aesthetic founded on a deliberate ambiguity, and on the resistance to codes of stability, sincerity and consistency of vision, whether in art or in life. The boundary between life and art is insistently transgressed.

In these first two apparently thematised sections of short lyrics, then, Wilde appears, on the one hand, to be exploring opposing philosophies and religious sentiments. But he is also, on the other hand, dramatising the refusal to choose between them, and questioning, indeed, the necessity of any such choice. The organisation of the sections shows a poetic persona in a state of flux about his religion, his politics and his choice of ideal love object: moreover, these three aspects shade into each other, and become indistinguishable. The poems are an early indication of the position that Wilde would later adopt in 'The Decay of Lying' (1889), that his only consistent view was that consistency was an overrated virtue: 'Who wants to be consistent? The dullard and the doctrinaire, the tedious people who carry out their principles to the *reductio ad absurdum* of practice. Not I. Like Emerson, I write over the door of my library the word "Whim".'³⁶

Thereafter, the section titles are more elusive in their descriptions of their content, and are less concerned with the will to define ethical choices. The *Wind Flowers* section for example is a series of poems whose connection with each other is dependent merely on the fact that they all deal with impressions. The appeal is to small moments of time rather than to stable values in art or ethics. The tone is amoral, or

decadent because it privileges the autonomy of a given event or emotion over its consequences. The section opens, for example with 'Impression du Matin,' which describes dawn in the urban setting of London. Dawn does not mark new beginnings, or fresh starts in this urban context. It is instead a time which makes the public space of the city into something uncannily other, emptied of its usual population, and inhabited only by 'outlaws.' The only person seen in the poem is 'one pale woman all alone' who loiters beneath 'the gas lamp's flare, / With lips of flame and heart of stone' (101). For Wilde's own audience, there could have been no doubt about her occupation: a woman alone in the city at dawn, with a painted face and hardened heart, must be a prostitute. But although the figure the woman is a typically Victorian fallen woman, nothing in the poem suggests that she is presented for the purpose of any moral lesson: she is just there.

The half-light of the morning works against the certainties, moral and aesthetic, of the clear light of day, in which things may be seen steadily and whole. The title, in French, suggests strangeness (or foreignness). A poem uses language as its medium: what then of a poem whose very title is written in another language, and whose meaning alludes to a different means of artistic expression — painting? The poem also describes the Thames as 'a nocturne of blue and gold,' with Wilde borrowing the musical metaphor which the artist James Abbot McNeil Whistler had used for the titles of his paintings. The status of the experience which inspires the poem is unclear. Does the poem describe what the poet has seen on the early morning streets of London? Or does it describe a picture by Whistler?³⁷

The poem operates on a dialectic between the values of that which is fleeting and that which is permanent. The Thames, the buildings, bridges and St. Paul's Cathedral all have a different status in the cold light of day from the one apportioned to them in the half-light of a grey dawn. Their permanence and respectability is undermined by the context of the half-light.

The Thames nocturne of blue and gold
 Changed to a Harmony in grey:
 A barge with ochre-coloured hay
 Dropt from the wharf: and chill and cold

The yellow fog came creeping down
 The bridges, till the houses' walls
 Seemed changed to shadows and St. Paul's
 Loomed like a bubble o'er the town. (101)

The solidity of the city is rendered insubstantial in the strange half-world between light and dark. The colour yellow is the colour of impermanence, moving from gold, to ochre, to the colour of the fog, the flare of the gas-lamps and the associated 'flame' of the lone woman's lips. Beneath these various evocations of yellow is the implication of the brightening light of the sun. But the sun is not a positive image here. Its association with the lone female figure in her fogbound nightmare city suggests that it has lost its ability to dispel the powers of night. The woman does not disappear with the rising sun. Instead she is petrified in a reversal of the trope of *prosopopoeia*, with flesh hardening into the permanence of stone. The poem makes no attempt therefore to re-establish the norms of daylight which its evocation of half-light have disrupted. The coming of day does not make it possible to see ideal things steadily and whole: there is no return to the ideal, nor even to the 'norm'.

Moreover, in these sections there is no implicit stability of purpose. The poems are flowers (wind flowers, or flowers of gold) or impressions. The self-dramatising political and religious rhetorics of the first sections gives way to the 'drifting' of purpose of which the epigraph poem warned its readers, and Wilde deliberately impersonates the poetic styles and preoccupations of other poets. When he tried to present a copy of *Poems* to the Oxford Union Library, they were rejected following a speech by Oliver Elton in which the works were accused of plagiarism.

It is not that these poems are thin — and they *are* thin: it is not that they are immoral — and they *are* immoral: it is not that they are this or that — and they *are* all this and all that: it is that they are for the most part not by their putative father at all, but by a number of better-known and more deservedly reputed authors. They are in fact by William Shakespeare, by Philip Sidney, by John Donne, by Lord Byron, by William Morris, by Algernon Swinburne, and by sixty more The Union Library already contains better and fuller editions of all these poets: the volume which we are offered is theirs, not Mr Wilde's: and I move that it be not accepted.³⁸

The borrowings of style and content are relatively easy to identify. Wilde pretended to be the Arnold of 'The Scholar Gypsy' in 'Magdalen Walks'; to be Swinburne in 'In the Gold Room' and in several passages of the longer poems; the Rossetti of 'The Blessed Damozel' in 'The Dole of the King's Daughter'; Morris in 'Ballade de Marguerite'; to be Milton, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley and Keats in different places throughout the volume. Imitation can never be a sincere expression of the composite self, required by contemporary criticism in the poetry it praised. In the lyrics, Wilde was impersonating other poets, not writing self-expressive poems. He plays out in explicit form the distinction between what Julia Kristeva calls the subject of enunciation and the subject of utterance, that is, the difference between the writer as origin of the text, and the poetic persona as the voice which is constructed to speak it.³⁹ He is playing (at being) himself. And, moreover, the self he plays is multiple and many-voiced, not stable, coherent and consistent across the volume. As such, the volume is implicated in Arnold's definition of decadence in which the poet has *learned* his poetic expression 'to the neglect of an inward poetic life' through which he would be able express his own developing character.

Wilde claimed in *De Profundis* that he had made the drama, the most impersonal form, 'as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or the sonnet'.⁴⁰ His volume of *Poems*, particularly the lyric sections, demonstrates a will to make the most personal modes into the most impersonal. The poet becomes a myriad of different personalities, and so is never required to choose and ethical, political or religious engagement. In Wilde's more mature works, the simultaneous occupation of contradictory roles is expressed through paradox and epigram. The concision of these forms displaces to the reader any responsibility for an analysis of the contradictory forces at work. In the short poems of the 1881 volume, that concision is lacking, and the mechanics of the thought processes are laid bare: we do not read *a* man and *a* mask, but a series of masks which may not disguise any substance behind them. The poems are not, therefore expressive of the composite character, personality or temperament of one man. One of the definitions of 'personality' in the OED is that it is 'the unique combination of

psycho-physical qualities or traits, inherent or acquired, that make up each person, as observable in his reactions to the environment or social group'. The key word there is 'observable'. Personality is something that can and should be fully known and understood as a whole. Wilde's poetry is not open to such transparent interpretations. The poems, noted the reviewer for the *Dial* in August, 1881, 'fail to move those deeper human chords inaccessible to their studied artificiality.'⁴¹ The poetry, that is, disrupts the text/writer homology which was at the heart of nineteenth-century criticism, and make it impossible to read off the quality of the man from his work. And by extension, it disturbs the ideal of man being knowable, stable, coherent and consistent. By turning the lyric into an impersonal form, Wilde attacked the critical valence of masculinity.

Escaping Frames: Wilde's Longer *Poems* of 1881

If the lyrics and shorter poems of Wilde's *Poems* disturbed definitions of masculinity as knowable, stable, coherent and consistent, the longer poems disturbed the definition of masculinity as a mode dependent on restraint. The lyrics were described as insincere; but in the longer poems, said the anonymous reviewer for the *Athenaeum* for 23 July, 1881,

What ... impresses most unfavourably the reader is the over-indulgence in metaphor, in affected neologisms and in concerts behind which sense and reason are obscured. Gradually, during recent years, this style has grown upon us, until the poetic literature of the later half of the nineteenth century seems likely to be classed with that which produced Lyly and the Euphuists.⁴²

And the notice in *The Saturday Review* was unimpressed by Wilde's 'profuse and careless imagery' which is a symptom at once of 'the want of literary sincerity,' the failure of masculine restraint, and inaccuracy: 'Mr. Wilde brings into his verse the names of innumerable birds and flowers, because he likes the sound of their names, not because he has made any observation of their habits'.⁴³

The charge is that Wilde's poetry in general, and the longer poems in particular, have too much style and too little substance. In the longer poems, the reader is deflected from any easy understanding. Wilde is a conspicuous consumer of metaphors, and of words for the sake of using them. Whole sections of the poems are devoted simply to *listing* what the poetic persona can ostensibly see around him. The lists contain things which are inconsistent with each other, such as flowers which do not bloom simultaneously discovered together in the Wildean landscape.⁴⁴ There are so many things to see, that the lists often collapse from sheer exhaustion, and the metaphors forget the grounds of their comparative function, and lose all connection with the observable world beyond the text in the textual pleasure of verbal consumption.⁴⁵ In other words, the poems do not see the world, and tell what they have seen clearly. Rather they dramatise a pleasure taken in abundance and lack of self-restraint.

Profusion is apparent in content, form and the sheer length of these poems. *Panthea* for example, is a poem of seduction, in which the Wildean persona exhorts his

beloved to live 'irresponsibly' with him, for the sake of pure feeling rather than according to the tenets of any 'dead philosophy':

Nay, let us walk from fire unto fire,
 From passionate pain to deadlier delight, —
 I am too young to live without desire,
 Too young art thou to waste this summer night
 Asking those idle questions which of old
 Man sought of seer and oracle, and no reply was told.

For, sweet, to feel is better than to know
 And wisdom is a childless heritage,
 One pulse of passion — youth's first fiery glow —
 Are worth the hoarded proverbs of the sage:
 Vex not thy soul with dead philosophy,
 Have we not lips to kiss with, hearts to love and eyes to see! (183)

If it were true to its own position, the poem should end there, and philosophy would indeed be silenced by a kiss. But the poem goes on for 28 stanzas more as the poet attempts through rhetoric to persuade the beloved to act on the love he wants her to feel. The title of one of the longest of the poems, *Humanitad*, suggests the epic qualities of human life. But Wilde's epic depends on length more than on any other formal or philosophical structure. It is a poetic which likes the sound of its own voice to the extent that it breaks out of the limits of metrical organisation in enjambements which cross not only line boundaries, but stanza boundaries as well.

Charmides, the longest of the poems, enacts all the features of which contemporary reviewers disapproved in Wilde's oeuvre, and it is certainly the poem which caused most irritation amongst them. It is the only long poem to tell a story, the narrative of a Greek sailor, Charmides, who is overwhelmed by passion for a statue of the goddess Athena. He hides in her temple until dead of night, and makes passionate love to her effigy. Athena, a virgin goddess, is infuriated by this sacrilegious act, and, when the sailor has re-boarded his ship, she appears to him in the shape of her emblem the owl, and tempts him to walk on the water, before leaving him to drown. The sailor's body is washed ashore by the agency of the sea-gods and mermaids, and is discovered by a Dryad who promptly falls in love with it, and spends the night with corpse, kissing it, believing Charmides to be merely sleeping. This love causes, in its turn, another tragedy. The Dryad is dedicated to Artemis, another virgin goddess.

When the goddess discovers her handmaid with the body of Charmides, she kills the unnamed nymph who dies embracing Charmides's body.

Although the principal players are now dead, the story is not over. Venus, goddess of love, takes pity on the thwarted passions of sailor and Dryad. She petitions Proserpine to ask her husband to admit them to Hades with their passions still intact: that is, Dryad and sailor do not pass through the waters of Lethe, and so do not forget how to feel. When the petition is granted, Charmides and the Dryad are united in love for all eternity.

From this rather bald paraphrase, it is obvious why the original reviewers were offended by the poem, with several referring to it by name, or quoting as evidence in their disapproval of the volume as whole. Thomas Wentworth Higginson commented that although Wilde was ostensibly talking about Ancient Greece, there was nothing 'Greek about his poems; his nudities do not suggest the antique whiteness of an antique statue, but rather the forcible unveiling of some insulted innocence.'⁴⁶ And the anonymous writer in *The Saturday Review* was considerably exercised by 'the sensual and ignoble tone which deforms a large proportion of the poems. So much talk about "grand cool flanks" and "crescent thighs" is decidedly offensive, and we have no wish to know that the writer ever "paddled with polished throat" of his lady love.' Even the one relatively positive contemporary response to *Poems*, from Walter Hamilton's *The Aesthetic Movement in England* (1882), was ambivalent about *Charmides*.

This poem abounds with both the merits and the faults of Mr. Oscar Wilde's style — it is classical, sad, voluptuous, and full of the most exquisitely musical word painting; but it is cloying for its very sweetness — the elaboration of its detail makes it over-luscious. It is no mere trick to be able to write thus; it betrays a luxuriant fancy and a great command of language; youth is apt to be exuberant, age will mellow down his muse, and then Mr. Wilde's undoubted genius will produce something finer than even *Charmides*.⁴⁷

Most readers were more damning, and for Higginson in particular, *Charmides* was evidence of a poet whose work and whose personality were unmanly. If *Charmides* were to be read aloud in company, 'not a woman would remain in the room until the end. ... And [this] poetry is called "manly" poetry. Is it manly to fling before the eyes of women page upon page which no man would read aloud in the presence women?

But there is another test of manhood: it lies in action' (Higginson, quoted in Beckson, p. 51).

The precise resonance of the word 'unmanly' for the 1880s is difficult to pin down. Higginson, as Alan Sinfield has suggested, uses it in part to suggest that Wilde's poetry was effeminate in the sense that it appealed to women, and thereby disrupted gender norms; the subject was unsuitable for mixed company, and represented an unwarranted extension of the subjects to which women might be exposed.⁴⁸ This involves also a class valence of the word, as well as its gender implications: 'unmanly' means 'ungentlemanly,' or 'unchivalrous' in the sense of poetic subjects which are unsuitable for a middle-class man to put forward in the presence of 'ladies'. Ideals of both gender and class, that is, are both called into question by poetry such as Wilde's.

The Victorians did not rigorously separate sex from gender in the way that twentieth-century social theory tends to do.⁴⁹ The story of *Charmides* is full of sex; it dwells in some detail on a series of sexual activities which are perverse, and which seem to be celebrated precisely because of that perversity: the statue of a virgin goddess is desecrated (and deflowered?) by Charmides, an act at once of sexual violation against a virgin, an offence against religious belief, and a transgression of the boundary between life and art;⁵⁰ the Dryad's passion for Charmides is active, not passive, and it is thus a sexual act which disrupts the gender norm of a passive femininity; it is also unwittingly necrophiliac; and the eventual consummation of the lovers beyond death continues the necrophiliac theme, and transgresses of the norms of Hades as well as those of the living world in which sex was supposed to be limited (in amount and duration), responsible and reproductive.⁵¹

The poem enunciates what was to become an obsession for Wilde in his later works: namely the matrix of relationships between artefact and artist, and artefact and audience. In this case, the chosen form of the statue, the three-dimensional representation of life, has the potential to become life itself, through a series of acts of *prosopopoeia*. In the years immediately before Wilde published his poem, the statue

had become an image that often found its way into pictorial art, perhaps because it legitimated the representation of nudity. Edward Burne-Jones's series of paintings, *Pygmalion and the Image* (1878), for example, narrates the desire of the artist to make flesh from stone. But, in contrast with Wilde's tale of sacrilege and seduction, as Jan Marsh comments, in Burne-Jones's paintings, all is chaste, 'in a metaphor of creation.'⁵² Thus, although the white marble figure turns to warm pink flesh at the touch of Venus, in the final painting of the series, *The Soul Attains*, the living Galatea is scarcely distinguishable from her marble counterpart. Only the colours of hair, eyes and lips indicate that the statue lives; even her pose is the same as when she was merely a stone statue in *The Heart Desires*. The perfection of smooth hairless body is not transformed by its alteration into flesh. Life, for Burne-Jones, resembles the purity and stasis of the artefact (Figures 4 and 5).

The erotic possibilities of the three-dimensional representation of life are far more explicit in Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema's picture, *The Sculptor's Model* (1877, Figure 6), which depicts in graphic detail a more fleshly version of the pose of the Greek statue. In this case the precise relationship between life and art, flesh and its representation, is more problematic. On one level, this is just a picture of the model's pose; on another, the pose is so disconcerting when robbed of its chaste and 'sacred whiteness' that it is poised uneasily between what is acceptable to art and what is forbidden in life. The Bishop of Carlisle commented that the 'almost photographic representation of a beautiful naked woman strikes my inartistic mind as somewhat, if not very, mischievous.'⁵³ The double frames of art — it is a representation of a subject which is on the point of being rendered into art as sculpture, and it is a painting — as well as the frame of antiquity, make it possible for Tadema to produce an explicitly erotic image which is nonetheless not deemed obscene, even by a bishop: it is naughty but not wicked. A critical distance is maintained as long as the sculptor's model is the subject only of the gaze of the spectator outside the frame, and the artist within it. She is chaste so long as she cannot be touched: her *integritas* (wholeness) is not threatened.⁵⁴ At the same time, as Peter Gay argues, distance is at once a 'come-on' and

a *noli me tangere*. It makes the work of art 'less erotic, for the viewer was supposed to be responding not to some sexual invitation, but rather to a historical or literary message; more erotic, for when he saw her draped in suitable guise, he could leer at the nude in ways more familiar naked bodies could never permit.'⁵⁵

Wilde certainly knew these works.⁵⁶ The difference between his conception of the various statue figures in *Charmides*, and the paintings by Burne-Jones and Alma-Tadema, is that in the paintings, the boundary between life and art is not, finally, transgressed. Galatea and the sculptor's model 'stand for' art because they are untouched by the artist, or because the artist's touch is one of veneration (Figure 5). Moreover, they are unreal because they do not display modesty or shame in the face of the dual gaze of artist and public. They betray no self-consciousness that they are naked in public; they do not meet the gaze of the viewer beyond the frame; and that unawareness enables these representations to maintain a strict boundary between life and art. As such, they try to enforce a 'proper' attitude to their nakedness. As Joyce's Stephen Dedalus puts it, true art 'arrests' the viewer in the moment of contemplation,⁵⁷ just as the figure which is represented is arrested by that representation. Art is 'pure' because it is radically separate from the motions and emotions of everyday life, and this view of artistic *integritas* continues into the twentieth century. Kenneth Clark, for example, argues that when erotic art incites action, it becomes pornographic or obscene: 'Art exists in the realm of contemplation, and is bound by some sort of imaginative transposition. The moment art becomes an incentive to action, it loses its true character.'⁵⁸

Wilde's interest in *Charmides* is, in contrast dependent on the transgressive energy of his protagonists, an energy which enables them to cross the boundaries between life and art, and between the sacred and the profane. The representation of the goddess, her very existence in the 'stable' form of sculpture, even before Charmides has seen her, is an incentive for his profane actions and a symptom of his already existing (but never-explained) perversity. For Wilde, the distinctions between the various zones of art and life, sacred and profane, worship and sex, are neither concrete

nor impermeable. Aesthetic laws are made, as it were, to be broken, since when art becomes merely formulaic, it loses its definition as art: as Pater puts it, 'failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world.'⁵⁹ All limitations on art and life are limits which invite challenge. Wilde tries to break down the radical separation in which 'the fixity of "life" in art and the fluidity of "life" in nature are incompatible.'⁶⁰ The aim is to replace rigidity with a fluidity in which the certainties about the nature of life and art can be called into question: the transgressed boundary is, for Wilde, the site of art, and it is this will to cross the limit, to spend time in the space between binaries that decadent art has its existence.⁶¹

The influence of Wilde's reading of Pater's *Renaissance*, in particular his essay on 'Winckelmann', can be detected in this poem of moving statues and effigies, though Wilde's poem goes much further in the direction of sensuousness than Pater's portrait of the artistic and critical temperament of his idealised Winckelmann. Pater's essay compares and contrasts Christian and Pagan attitudes to art. Whilst the Greeks' emphasis on the senses in art 'is shameless and childlike ... Christianity with its uncompromising idealism, discrediting the slightest touch of sense, has lighted up for the artistic life, with its inevitable sensuousness, a background of flame.' In Christian Europe, therefore, it has been difficult to bring together artistic (sensual) consciousness with religious (spiritual) idealism; the emphasis on the senses is a form of intoxication. 'From this intoxication, Winckelmann is free: he fingers those pagan marbles with unsinged hands, with no sense of shame or loss. That is to deal with the sensuous side of art in the pagan manner.'⁶² In the essay, that is, Pater puts across an ideal attitude for the approach to sensuous arts in which the pleasure of the senses is treated with the reverence usually reserved for the spiritual realm. Wilde takes the idea from the Winckelmann essay that one might reach out and touch the statues, but he insists on sensuality rather than purity. His figures are not 'sexless', as Pater implied Winckelmann's ideal ones were (Pater, ed. Hill, p. 176, 1873 text). And whilst the poem is ostensibly about a Greek subject, the whole atmosphere is laid over with the Christian notion of the guilt and sin of the physical body. The poem, that is, is self-

conscious in its deliberately transgressive energy, with the narrating figure commenting, in various asides, on the impossibility, and, indeed, undesirability, of separating sex from sin.⁶³ The *frisson* comes from the deliberate enactment of forbidden things, taking Pater's views on the sensual much further than Pater himself chose to do.

The form of *Charmides* is one in which a limit is imposed and transgressed. It is written in a six-line stanza, in which the last line is always longer than the first five, a heptameter replacing the established pattern of the pentameter. Each stanza, that is, resists its only limits. The transgressive tendency in metre is reinforced by the regularity of the rhyme-scheme: the stanzas rhyme ABABCC, but the finality of the emphatic double rhyme on CC is disrupted by the long line length of the final line of each stanza, and by constant enjambement, both from line to line, and across stanzaic breaks. The first sentence, for example, which is not untypical of the whole, lasts for 8 stanzas, 48 lines.

Charmides is the ship's look-out, and our first view of him gives him some of the quality of the statue, making him, in effect, the ship's figurehead.

He was a Grecian lad, who coming home
 With pulpy figs and wine from Sicily
 Stood at his galley's prow, and let the foam
 Blow through his crisp brown curls unconsciously,
 And holding wave and wind in boy's despite
 Peered from his dripping seat across the wet and stormy night ... (119)

His impassivity in the face of the storm, his unconsciousness and his beauty (for Wilde, curly brown hair is always a marker of male beauty), make him a work of art within a work of art. Like art, he has apparently impermeable boundaries, *integritas*. The cargo of fruit (the 'pulpy figs') signifies as a marker of sexuality, as yet unawakened. Like the ideal statues of Pater's Winckelmann, Charmides is suspended 'between growth and completion' (Pater, ed. Hill, p. 174, 1873 text).

When the ship docks, Charmides goes to Athena's temple, a sexually-charged atmosphere, despite (or perhaps because) of the goddess's virgin status. The offerings of the crowd, for example, are luxurious, pleasing to all the senses. Whilst maidens

sing, men bring their sacrifices to the altar: offerings of milk and honey and oil, gifts which ooze with sensuality:

A beechen cup brimming with milky foam,
 A fair cloth wrought with cunning imagery
 Of hounds in chase, a waxen honey-comb
 Dripping with oozy gold which scarce the bee
 Had ceased from building, a black skin of oil
 Meet for the wrestlers ... (121)

When the crowds have gone, Charmides conceals himself in the temple with the initial aim of gazing in secret at the goddess's effigy. He stands 'ready for death with parted lips' — but the parted lips imply that he is also ready for sensual experience; he then approaches the statue, and touches it.

... off his brow he tossed the clustering hair,
 And from his limbs he threw the cloak away,
 For whom would not such love make desperate,
 And nigher came, and touched her throat, and with hands violate

Undid the curirass, and the crocus gown,
 And bared the breasts of polished ivory,
 Till from the waist the peplos falling down
 Left visible the sacred mystery
 Which to no lover will Athena show,
 The grand cool flanks, the crescent thighs, the bossy hills of snow. (124)

There follows a very explicit account of Charmides's act of desecration, couched in the terms of romantic love, and punctuated by asides from the narrating Wildean persona. These asides demonstrate the voyeuristic pleasure in the story the narrator tells; he approves the actions of his protagonist, and implies that audience should do the same.

Never I ween did lover hold such tryst,
 For all night long he murmured honeyed word,
 And saw her sweet unravished limbs, and kissed
 Her pale and argent body undisturbed,
 And paddled with the polished throat, and pressed
 His hot and beating heart upon her chill and icy breast. (125)

In his nocturnal activity, Charmides puts aside his position as perfected work of art which he had maintained whilst still aboard the ship at its figurehead. It is as though he is a statue which has come alive, and uses his new-found freedom to perpetrate a quasi-necrophiliac act. More importantly, it is not only his own personal and aesthetic boundaries which he has overstepped; his passion not only humanises him by making

him subject to human instincts, but it has also the same effect on the goddess too. In embracing the *artistic* body of the statue, the statue is reduced to the human (real) body of a woman. Through his action, words become deeds, and art becomes flesh.⁶⁴ As we have seen, one reviewer commented that he had no wish to know ‘the writer “paddled with the throat”’ of his lady love. But this is considerably more than an offence against the good manners of sexual reticence in poetry. It is a profane version of the transubstantiation, in which the symbol of deity becomes its flesh. Although Athena is (in 1881) a goddess without any followers, the implications are clear: if this can happen to one virginal deity, there is no reason why it should not happen to others. The step from profanity in embracing a pagan statue to embracing the figures of the Virgin Mary or Christ crucified is not so very great.⁶⁵

When he leaves the temple after his night of frenzied passion, Charmides goes into the countryside where he falls asleep. The passers-by who see him think that his reposing figure is so beautiful that he must be a god, Hylas or Narcissus, or Dionysos. ‘Those are the fond and crimson lips no woman can allure’ (127), they comment to themselves. The country people dare not look on deity because ‘They live not long who on the gods immortal come to spy’ (128), and they leave him in peace. They maintain, that is, a sacred *cordon sanitaire*, and refuse to approach the artistic body which they interpret as divine; their simple piety contrasts with Charmides’s own attitude when he sees a god. As a figure who is removed by sleep from ‘everyday life’, Charmides has resumed the unconsciousness of a work of art. When he awakes it is to a modified consciousness. He now cares for nothing, ‘for he had seen / The breasts of Pallas and the naked wonder of the Queen.’ (130)

The goddess wreaks her revenge by drowning her ‘ardent, amorous idolater’ in a profane and slightly comic version of Christ’s invitation to Simon Peter to walk upon the water. Her violence and fury against him, however, have the effect of reinscribing Charmides’s bodily *integritas*, and render him once more into a work of art. Death, ‘with chill and nipping frost’, cools the passion which had given Charmides the transgressive energy to cross the frames of art and religion. His body is washed up in a

silent leafy glade where even putrefaction does not touch it. But his very perfection provokes the passion of a Dryad, who contemplates re-enacting the very scene of desecration which had brought Charmides to death: the Dryad knows that her love is profane because she is dedicated to the virgin goddess, Artemis: she does not know that it is doubly so, because she does not realise that Charmides is dead. Charmides, that is, has set up a chain reaction. His original act of transgression leads in the end to the same fate being played on his body. The Dryad breaks many rules in her wooing of the dead body. She offends against gender ideology in her attempt to initiate a love affair with a passive male subject. She offends against the laws of nature by loving a corpse; and she offends the gods in her will to break her vow of virginity to Artemis. The roles of active masculinity and passive femininity are subverted, as the Dryad is of necessity the active party in her affair. She acts out a reversal of the Sleeping Beauty story, except that there will be no miraculous awakening from Charmides's sleep and her passion is remarkable. The Dryad

deemed it would not be
So dread a thing to feel a sea-god's arms
Crushing her breasts in amorous tyranny, ...
nor thought it sin

To yield her treasure unto one so fair,
And lay beside him, thirsty with love's drouth,
Called him soft names, played with his tangled hair,
And with hot lips made havoc of his mouth ... (137)

As Patricia Flanagan Behrendt has argued, *Charmides* is a poem in which five rules about heterosexual love, constant in Wilde's oeuvre, are played out. It shows:

(1) self-centred sexual desire where the love object is unresponsive, inanimate or dead; (2) sexual activity which prompts violent retribution; (3) the satisfying of personal desire which results inevitably in death; (4) the implication that the attraction that the desired object holds is essentially deadly; (5) the seeming failure of experience to advance self-knowledge.⁶⁶

And, for the Dryad, the knowledge that she will be shot by her mistress for her disobedience does not prevent her acting on her passion. Knowledge of impending doom does not make the protagonists less willing to commit themselves to passionate acts. These are actions complete in themselves, and committed for their own sake.

When the justice of Artemis arrives, it is violent and sexual. Artemis appears in person to deliver her blow, and the Dryad's wished-for consummation of passion is replaced with a violent penetration of death by an arrow from the goddess's bow:

... where the little flowers of her breast
 Just brake into their milky blossoming,
 This murderous paramour, this unbidden guest,
 Pierced and struck deep in horrid chambering
 And ploughed a bloody furrow with its dart,
 And dug a long red road, and cleft with wingèd death her heart.

Sobbing her life out with a bitter cry
 On the boy's body fell the Dryad maid,
 Sobbing for incomplete virginity,
 And raptures unenjoyed, and pleasures dead,
 And all the pain of things unsatisfied,
 And the bright drops of crimson youth crept down her throbbing side. (145-6)

Sex and death are here explicitly connected. The Dryad's life-blood stands in for the blood of her virginity; and virginity is regarded not as a perfect state, but as a state of incompleteness.

It is clear that the poem's narrator is on the side of the lovers. Virginity is not accorded any of the value which the goddesses, Artemis and Athena, give it: nor is the implied audience supposed to share their view, suggesting an implicit rupture of standards of sexual conduct. The goddesses are cold and warlike, and use violence to impose their views. Nonetheless, although the warmth of sexual love is applauded by the narrator, it remains an act which is always punished in a most Victorian way. Love can only be attained in all its perfection in the world beyond the grave. Sex is not ordinary or domestic. It is composed of massive acts of profane transgression. It is central to life, but it is always destructive of it, as the narrator comments on the Dryad's death:

Ah! pitiful it was to hear her moan,
 And very pitiful to see her die
 Ere she had yield up her sweets, or known
The joy of passion, that dread mystery
Which not to know is not to live at all,
And yet to know is to be held in death's most deadly thrall. (146, my emphasis)

The poem speaks then of the pressing need for sexual fulfilment; but it cannot imagine a sexual passion which is not punished by death. The physical is only resolved when it becomes metaphysical, in the world beyond the grave.

It is Venus who brings about the consummation of the love affair between Charmides and his Dryad. They spend eternity in passionate (though ultimately unproductive) embrace:

And all his hoarded sweets were hers to kiss
And all her maidenhood was his to slay,
And limb to limb in long and rapturous bliss
Their passion waxed and waned. (151)

This is a passion without end: it defies temporality, but it also defies the implicit purpose of sex — reproduction. As such, it also defies conventional sexual morality. This is a physical passion which takes place in a metaphysical place (Hades), and which takes place entirely for its own sake, in a world without consequences. It is passion, that is, without responsibility. The poem strains against limitations, but, in the end, it refuses the very challenge it has presented. It resorts to silence at the moment of ecstasy ('Too venturous poesy, O why essay / To pipe again of passion!' [151]), and it cannot conceive of consummation occurring without complication in the real world. The price of illicit sexual activity is death, in part, because this is, after all, a Victorian poem. But also because sexual ecstasy disrupts the *integritas* of the self, in life as in art. 'Ecstasy' means 'to stand outside oneself', and sex is therefore a place in which boundaries are called into question. In the poem, not only is art contaminated by life, life is also threatened by contact with art: and as such, it is a decadent poem because of its refusal of the certainties of the rigid, permanent boundaries which are supposed to define gender, and the values of art, culture and religion.

Notes

¹ Matthew Arnold, in Howard Forster Lowry (ed.), *Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 64.

² Michel Foucault, 'Language to Infinity' in Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), p. 64.

³ Letter from the Marquess of Queensberry to Lord Alfred Douglas, 1 April, 1894, quoted in Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 394.

⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Act 3, in Merlin Holland (ed.), *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* [3rd edition] (Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), p. 399. Quotations from Wilde's works, except for his poetry, are taken from this edition, hereafter cited as *CW* followed by a page number.

⁵ Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1986). Gagnier identifies the society identified in *Earnest* as 'a closed system representing an exclusive society' (p. 114) in which the characters operate within static frames of reference which reproduce their own (social, political and cultural) power.

⁶ Owen Dudley Edwards, 'Introduction to the Plays' in *CW*, p. 355. In this, the play is similar to the point made by the *Punch* cartoon discussed at the beginning of the Introduction.

⁷ Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 17. There are many other examples of Wilde's disdain for plain-speaking. Dollimore also cites Wilde's reported answer to an alderman who had praised him for 'calling a spade a spade.' 'I would like to protest against the statement that I ever called a spade a spade. The man who did so should be condemned to use one.' The remark is also reported in Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 347.

⁸ Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet, 1977), pp. 42-43.

⁹ Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp,' [1964] in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1968), p. 275.

¹⁰ Selwyn Image, 'In November Last, at the London Institution, and Covent Garden Opera House', *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, 6 (1891), 29-34, p. 30.

¹¹ Max Nordau, *Degeneration* [1892, English translation, 1895], intro George L. Mosse, facsimile edition (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 5.

¹² See Appendix B in Richard Ellmann's *Oscar Wilde*, where Ellmann reprints Helen Potter's phonetic transcription of Wilde's 'Lecture on Art', pp. 592-3.

¹³ W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 87.

¹⁴ R. M. Seiler, writing of the reception of Pater's works, notes that the complexity of his writing and a vocabulary which defied analysis led Pater's reviewers to question his sincerity. See R. M. Seiler (ed.), *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 4.

¹⁵ Lionel Johnson, 'A Note Upon the Practice and Theory of Verse at the Present Time Obtaining in France', *The Century Guild Hobby Horse*, 6 (1891), 61-66, p. 64.

¹⁶ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), p. 6 ff.

¹⁷ James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 8.

¹⁸ Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side, Toward a Genealogy of a Discourse on Male Sexualities*, (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 18-32.

¹⁹ The list is adapted from Dollimore's *Sexual Dissidence*, p. 15.

²⁰ My discussion of all Wilde's poetry takes for its text the edition prepared by Robert Ross in *The First Collected Edition of the Works of Oscar Wilde*, 15 volumes (London: Methuen and Co., 1908-1922). The poems appear in volume 6 (1908). The two most recent editions of Wilde's *Complete Works*, published by Folio in 1993 and HarperCollins in 1994, both prepared by Merlin Holland, present the poems in their chronological order of composition, an order established by Professor Bobby Fong at the University of Michigan. Whilst this practice is very useful, particularly in following Wilde's development as a poet, I prefer the earlier version for this argument. Wilde published his poems in a privately printed edition in 1881 with a second edition in 1882, which was the last publication of them which he oversaw. He chose to group the poems thematically rather than chronologically. This is significant for two related reasons. It implies first that Wilde deliberately grouped his poems according to the attitudes that each displayed. And second, the grouping was one of the reasons for the hostile reception accorded to the *Poems*, because their order was one of the places in which contemporary reviewers were able to locate what they saw as the insincerity of the poems and their creator. All references to Wilde's poetic oeuvre are taken from the Robert Ross edition, and are cited by parenthetically by page number after their appearance.

²¹ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 131.

²² Regenia Gagnier comments that in his poetry Wilde, far from peddling 'art for art's sake,' made a point of publishing what he thought the public wanted, as a matter of public consumption rather than high art. See Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1987), pp. 6-7.

²³ Indeed, Wilde admitted to his friend, the Catholic David Hunter Blair, that he had deliberately compromised over his position on his own priorities because he 'would never have won the Newdigate if [he] had taken the Pope's side against the [Italian] King's' [cited in Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 88]. Wilde might well have been at an advantage compared to other candidates for the prize, since he had actually been to Ravenna in the Easter Vacation from Oxford in 1877, travelling with his former tutor from Trinity, Professor Mahaffy. His travels, however, made him late for the start of the summer term without permission; Wilde was in serious trouble for this adventure, and was fined for his late return to college.

²⁴ See Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, pp. 67-74.

²⁵ There are for example allusions and near quotations to: Wordsworth's 'Daffodils', Browning's 'Home Thoughts from Abroad' and 'Love Among the Ruins', Tennyson's 'Mariana', Shelley's 'Ozymandias' and 'Ode to the West Wind', as well as wholesale borrowings from the tone and imagery of Keats.

²⁶ [Unsigned Review], in *Saturday Review*, 23 July, 1881, reprinted in Karl Beckson (ed.) *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 37. This reviewer was not alone in seeing the poems as insincere. 'The whole is as inflated and as insincere as it well can be,' wrote the reviewer in *The Athenaeum*, on 23 July, 1883; and the reviewer for the *Dial* in August 1881, informed its readers that the poems lacked the exaltation which 'can come alone from a high and sincere poetic purpose.' See Beckson (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, p. 37, p. 41.

²⁷ The phrase is from Dollimore's *Sexual Dissidence*, pp. 14-16, developed by Dollimore to represent the ideal standards of conduct and artistry against which Wilde offended in his reversal of the relative values of binary oppositions.

²⁸ This allegiance is perhaps surprising. As Ellmann notes, Wilde thought of Queen Victoria, Victor Hugo and Napoleon Bonaparte as the three great personalities of the nineteenth century. Perhaps Wilde separated the personality of Victoria from the monarchical system which she represented. See Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 509.

²⁹ Letter from Wilde to Yeats, August or September, 1894, in Rupert Hart-Davis (ed.), *Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 121.

³⁰ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 24.

³¹ Arthur Ransome, *Oscar Wilde: a Critical Study* [1912] (London: Methuen and Co., 1915), p.27. As Lynda Nead argues, Hood's poem provided a set of shorthand images for the rest of the century on the nature of the tragedy and loss of prostitution, and the death of the 'guilty' woman. See Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 168-9.

³² Later, Wilde was often to describe Lord Alfred Douglas in these colours: he has 'rose-red lips' and is 'quite the narcissus — so white and gold' (See Letter to Alfred Douglas, January 1893 in Hart-Davis (ed.), *Selected Letters*, p. 107; and Letter to Robert Ross, May/June, 1892, in *ibid.*, p. 104). Neil Bartlett comments that these colours have a strong erotic charge for Wilde, because they suggest nakedness: 'a man is only white and gold when naked.' See Neil Bartlett, *Who Was that Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1989), p.56. The colours red, gold and white are picked up in other poems in the volume. In particular, a poem entitled 'In the Gold Room: a Harmony', uses them to represent innocence, temptation and consummation in the context of a female beloved (see *Poems*, p. 159). In the poem the beloved is encoded in terms which are mutually contradictory. Her white hands, playing the piano, imply innocence. But the motion of her hands on the keys betrays something more fitful, as her fingers 'stray' in 'fitful fantasy.' And white is also associated with a sexually charged sea foam, and the aggressive imagery of the vagina dentata: 'the drifting foam of a restless sea / When the waves show their teeth in the flying breeze.' Thus even the quasi-innocent colour of white implies sexuality and violence. When the poet reaches the colour red, the erotic charge, not unnaturally becomes more obvious, with red lips kissing, 'a crimson shrine', the 'bleeding wounds of the pomegranate,' and the 'spilt-out blood of the rose-red wine.' Red, gold and white, that is, are colours also associated with female nakedness.

³³ Eve Sedgwick notes that Christianity's prohibition of the body is contradictory in Western culture, in particular in the figure of Christ crucified, which is a homosexual and sado-masochistic icon, and one of the few places in which the unclothed male body is legitimated as an object of the male gaze. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 140.

³⁴ Philip K. Cohen, *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde* (London: London and Associated University Presses, 1978), p. 39.

³⁵ The potential danger and ambiguity in the poem 'Madonna Mia' is compounded when it is compared, as Richard Ellmann compares it, to one of Wilde's uncollected poems, entitled 'Wasted Days'. 'Wasted Days' was written before 'Madonna Mia' and published in an undergraduate magazine entitled *Kottabos* in 1877. Except that 'Madonna Mia' evokes a female figure and 'Wasted Days' a 'fair slim boy not made for this world's pain', the two poems are virtually the same. The erotic charge of a male subject of desire, however, is pushed aside in the volume publication of the poem. The interchangeability of all the features of the two central figures in the respective poems suggests the interchangeability of the figures themselves. See Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 59 for an extended treatment of the similarities between the two poems.

For Wilde, the attributes of ideal womanhood appear to be attractiveness and untouchability. In an unpublished essay on 'Greek Women', probably written whilst Wilde was at Oxford, his most generous praise is reserved for Princess Nausicaa who is attracted to Odysseus, but who does not break the frame of her own ideality in order to approach him. Wilde writes that we must not 'dream away our lives and do nothing because a woman is beautiful, [nor] turn ourselves into swine and brute beasts for a fair body and red lips: rather let us find a woman without whom our own life is incomplete, and our days and nights dreary wanderings.' (Unpublished MS, 'Greek Women', Clark University Library, California). In other words, the idea is to be found *between* the physical world of reality and the dreamscape of art. It is a thin line to walk, and it is dangerous to fall on either side of it, into sexual brutality, or into useless dreaming. The Virgin Mary of 'Madonna Mia' is a figure who combines physical beauty with spiritual untouchability, with the emphasis on her spirit rather than her body. In other poems, for example 'The New Helen', written as a tribute to Lily Langtry (see Ellmann, p. 111), Helen's ideal status comes from the fact that shifts the balance towards the erotic body, and away from the soul. She is a sexually active, if mythical, woman. Her story makes her 'sexy'; but her status as myth or fiction makes it impossible for the poetic persona to approach her on terms of sexual equality ('So bowed I am before thy mystery' [75]).

³⁶ Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying' in *Intentions* (London: Heinemann and Balestrier, 1891), p. 5.

³⁷ Whistler used the title *Nocturne in Blue and Gold* twice, once for a painting of Valparaiso Bay (1866), now in the Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC; and once for his depiction of Old Battersea Bridge (1872-3), now in the Tate Gallery, London. His use of the word 'nocturne' was intended to remove pictorial art from the narrative constraints of Victorian genre painting. Wilde's adoption of it in this context re-places 'Nocturne' into a narrative frame of interpretation by making explicit the 'immoral' purpose of the 'lone woman.' Wilde's poem does not, however, describe in any literal way Whistler's painting of Battersea Bridge. For information on Whistler's paintings and ideas, see Robin Spencer (ed.), *Whistler: a Retrospective* (New York: Wing Books, 1991).

³⁸ Henry Newbolt, *My World as in My Time* [1932], quoted in Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 140.

³⁹ Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel' in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 46.

⁴⁰ *De Profundis* (written in Reading Gaol, 1897, first published in abridged form by Robert Ross in 1905, full text in 1962), in Rupert Hart-Davis (ed.), *Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 194.

⁴¹ [Unsigned Review], in *Dial*, August, 1881, reprinted in Karl Beckson (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, op. cit., p. 41.

⁴² [Unsigned Review] in *Athenaeum*, 23 July, 1881, reprinted in Beckson (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, p. 36. The identification of Wilde's style with Euphuism suggests that it will not be long before his writing is described as 'decadent', since Euphuism, according to Richard Le Gallienne, is one of the marks of the decadent writer. See Richard Le Gallienne, 'Considerations Suggested by Mr Churton Collins's "Illustrations of Tennyson"', *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, 7 (1892), 77-83.

⁴³ [Unsigned Review] in *The Saturday Review*, 23 July, 1881, reprinted in Beckson (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, p. 37.

⁴⁴ For example, *The Garden of Eros* has daffodils, violets and harebells (spring flowers) vying for attention with clematis and irises (which flower in June) (see *Poems*, pp. 41-43); and summer-flowering lilies are present in the English Easter of *The Burden of Itys*, alongside harebells, meadowsweet and anemones (p. 81).

⁴⁵ Patricia Waugh notes that the list is 'a favourite strategy' in self-conscious writing. 'In extolling ... the principle of substitution instead of contextuality, the list keeps reminding us of possible exhaustion, of the emergence of nothingness in the series, yet nothingness is never allowed to appear

because the list always leaves us with the list itself.' See Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen and Co., 1984), p. 144.

⁴⁶ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 'Unmanly Manhood', *Women's Journal* (Boston), 4 February, 1882, reprinted in Beckson (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, p. 51.

⁴⁷ Walter Hamilton, *The Aesthetic Movement in England* [1882], in Beckson (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, p. 48.

⁴⁸ Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (London: Cassell, 1994), p. 91.

⁴⁹ See Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side*, pp. 17-18 for a discussion of pre-twentieth-century classifications, and the gradual separation of the categories of sex and gender.

⁵⁰ A possible source for Wilde's *Charmides* is to be found in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, which tells the story of the desecration of the *Venus* of Praxiteles: 'There is a story that a man who had fallen in love with the statue hid in the temple at night and embraced it intimately; a stain bears witness to his lust.' The stain is often a metonymic figure for the sexual act and virginity. In Pliny's story, art is contaminated by its contact with life. A permanent mark would imply that the damage Athena suffers from Charmides's assault is irrevocable. See Pliny the Elder, *Selections from the Natural History*, trans. John F. Healey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 346.

⁵¹ As Foucault argues, Victorian discourses of sex had strong taboos against homosexuality and masturbation, indexing such activities as wasteful of sexual energy; the sex which was seen as ideal was reproductive and therefore necessarily heterosexual. (See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Volume 1, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 103-114. A sexuality which was without restraint, and which could serve no reproductive function (as in the violation of a sacred statue, or the sex acts of two dead bodies) could only be indexed as perverse.

⁵² Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women: Images of Femininity in Pre-Raphaelite Art* (London: Guild Publishing, 1987), p. 14.

⁵³ Quoted in Russell Ash, *Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema* (London: Michael Joseph, n.d.), n.p.

⁵⁴ The word is used by Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* [1916] (London: Granada, 1979), p. 192. Following Thomas Aquinas, Stephen defines art as being dependent on *integritas*, *consonantia* and *claritas* (wholeness, harmony and shining clarity).

⁵⁵ Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience, Victoria to Freud*, Volume 1, *The Education of the Senses* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 382.

⁵⁶ See Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 76 and p. 87.

⁵⁷ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: 'The feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. These are kinetic emotions. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The esthetic emotion ... is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing.' (p. 186)

⁵⁸ From Kenneth Clark's evidence to Lord Longford's committee on pornography, in *Pornography: The Longford Report* (London: Coronet, 1972), pp. 99-100; quoted in Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 27.

⁵⁹ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, Donald L. Hill (ed.) (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1980), p. 189 (1873 text).

⁶⁰ Albert Gelpi, 'Emily Dickinson and the Deerslayer,' in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (eds), *Shakespeare's Sisters*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 122-134. Quoted by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 14.

⁶¹ See Michel Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression,' in Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, op.cit., p. 34. Foucault comments that 'a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable, and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows'.

⁶² Walter Pater, 'Winckelmann', first published in *Westminster Review*, 31, n.s. (January, 1867), 80-110; included also, in extensively revised form, for first edition of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). See Pater, ed. Hill, p. 177, 1873 text.

⁶³ For example:

Those who have never known a lover's sin
Let them not read my ditty, it will be
To their dull ears so musicless and thin

That they will have no joy of it, but ye
 To whose wan cheeks now creep the lingering smile,
 Ye who have learned who Eros is, - O listen yet awhile. (124)

The narrator not only associates love and guilt, but also creates his own implied audience of like-minded individuals who have shared the pleasurable experience of mixing the two together.

⁶⁴ This is in marked contrast to the experience of Leopold Bloom in the Dublin museum. Bloom spends much time considering the existence of orifices in statues, and is disappointed in his failure to discover either 'the presence or absence of posterior rectal orifices in the case of Hellenic divinities.' Bloom is unable even to see if such things exist, where Charmides not only sees but acts upon what he sees. See James Joyce, *Ulysses* [1922] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, Student Edition, 1986), p. 600.

⁶⁵ This is compounded in the poem by the fact that rituals of the goddess's temple mirror those of the Catholic church. When Charmides is left alone in the temple, for example, one light has deliberately been left aglow, to signify the presence of deity (121). This is similar to the sanctuary light in the Catholic church which symbolises the presence of the transubstantiated Host.

⁶⁶ Patricia Flanagan Behrendt, *Oscar Wilde: Eros and Aesthetics* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 50.

Chapter Four

The Sphinx and The Ballad: Learning the Poetics of Restraint

When Wilde was tried and convicted on 25 May, 1895 under section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 which criminalised all acts, whether public or private, of gross indecency between men,¹ there was unleashed a massive public furore which attacked a complex matrix of ideas around gender (and particularly effeminacy and/or unmanliness), sexuality, literature and decadence. The process of the trials rendered transparent the operation of the nineteenth-century critical view that the work and the man, his art and his conduct, were inseparable. The effects of public disquiet were widely felt. It was alleged that in the aftermath of the trial, the boat-trains to France were packed with young men who sought to escape a similar fate for themselves. W. B. Yeats commented that in the streets outside the courtroom, the harlots danced for joy,² implying that heterosexual licence was the real effect of the trials, an ironic conclusion in the light of periodical and newspaper convictions earlier in the decade that it was precisely heterosexual licence which characterised decadence. For Holbrook Jackson, Wilde's fall meant the end of the 1890s as an age of 'literary and artistic renaissance, degenerating into decadence.' The second part of the decade was to be characterised 'by a new sense of patriotism, degenerating into jingoism', signalled by the rise of the Yellow Press and the fall of *The Yellow Book*, in which a rhetoric of aggressive masculinity replaced the modulated tones of decadent writing earlier in the decade.³

This chapter is an examination of the poetry that Wilde published immediately before and after his trial and imprisonment, focusing on *The Sphinx* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Through an examination of the matrix of gender, sexuality and decadence which the trials exposed, it shows how Wilde sought a kind of artistic rehabilitation following his imprisonment, through a modification of his poetic style and subject-matter. That this attempt to regain some public approval was only partially

successful is a measure of the extent to which decadence remained associated in the public mind with effeminacy and same-sex desire — that it was read as a matter of conduct rather than artistic practice.

One of the pieces of evidence brought before the court during the trials of Oscar Wilde in April and May 1895 was a letter which he had written to Lord Alfred Douglas, probably in the early part of 1893. The letter had subsequently been used in the attempted blackmail of Wilde by the renters patronised by himself and Douglas. It read:

My Own Boy, Your sonnet is quite lovely, and it is a marvel that those red rose-leaf lips of yours should have been made no less for music of song than for madness of kisses. Your slim gilt soul walks between passion and poetry. I know Hyacinthus, whom Apollo loved so madly, was you in Greek days.

Wilde signed off, 'Always, with undying love, yours Oscar'.⁴ At the trial, Wilde described how this letter, carelessly left in the pocket of an old suit of clothes by Douglas, had been used to try to extort money from him. The blackmailer, William Allen, had commented to him that 'a very curious construction can be put on that letter.' In his account of this affair at the first trial, Wilde said that he had told Allen that 'The letter, which is a prose poem, will shortly be published in sonnet form in a delightful magazine, and I will send you a copy of it'.⁵

A private letter between two friends or lovers is presumably one of the textual spaces in which the relationship between writing and conduct is most transparent. Allen's remarks about the 'curious construction' that could be placed on the letter is obviously, in the context of an attempted blackmail, a suggestion that the textual evidence is also evidence of criminal congress between Wilde and Douglas. At best it represented a kind of linguistic effeminacy; at worst, it 'proved' homosexual activity. Wilde's answer to Allen was intended, in typical fashion, to subvert the reading of 'a curious construction'. Poetry is an art of creative interpretation as well as of creative expression; it encourages the reader to put curious constructions on the text. In terms of Wilde's own theories of art, moreover, the responsibility for meaning was finally to be located with the recipient, not the originator: 'Those who find ugly meanings in

beautiful places are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault.⁶ It is, that is, the blackmailer/reader rather than the victim/writer who is at fault, because in order to find 'ugly meanings' in a text, the reader has to know that such meanings are possible. The recognition of the ugly meaning points to the reader's — not the writer's — guilt.

This attempt at shifting the 'blame' was, however, turned directly on its head at Wilde's trials, and, as Ed Cohen has shown, the questions which Wilde was asked in court 'were not intended to elicit the explicitly sexual aspects of his interactions with the various men named in the plea. Instead they sought to reiterate the parallel between the sexual and the textual by foregrounding precisely those aspects of Wilde's life that seemed to corroborate the "immorality" of his texts.'⁷ For the court, the connections between signifier and signified, between writer and text, and text and conduct, were absolute; the court refused to follow Wilde's verbal play which sought to undermine such connections. Mr. Justice Wills in his summing up in the last trial seems to have felt that the curious construction spoken of by Allen was at least a possible reading of the letter, and directed his remarks towards showing that it was also a reasonable interpretation, to be shared by any audience of right-thinking family men:

what father would not try to save his own son from the associations suggested by the two letters which you have seen from the prisoner to Lord Alfred Douglas? I will avoid saying whether these letters seem to point to actual criminal conduct or not. But they must be considered in relation to the other evidence in the case. ... speaking personally, I cannot see the extreme beauty of the language said to be used. ... But suppose that the letters are 'prose poems,' suppose that they are things of which the intellectual and literary value can only be appreciated by persons of high culture, are they thereby any the less poisonous for a young man? Is the language of those letters calculated to calm and keep down the passions which in a young man need no stimulus? ... Lord Queensberry has drawn from these letters the conclusion that most fathers would draw.⁸

Wilde was not, of course, convicted only on the basis of the letters from himself to Douglas which appeared in court. But their appearance is nonetheless significant, as is his defence to Allen that the letter quoted above was a poem. Part of Wilde's 'guilt' resided in the fact that he refused to take seriously the threat that a curious construction could be put on the letter. 'There is no use trying to "rent" you,' another of the blackmailers had told him, 'as you only laugh at us.'⁹ His mistake was to believe that

he could equally convince a jury of his peers that this was a laughing matter. The letter is an example of the ways in which Wilde habitually broke down boundaries and called into questions the certainties by which late nineteenth-century England wanted to live. It is an example of *prosopopoeia*, a crossing of boundaries between word and flesh. The letter, which had been private property, had become public property; it was prose, but it was also a poem. It walked, in its own words, the line 'between passion and poetry', the boundary between life and art, and it was, as such, a fitting emblem of Wilde's own position. It is symptomatic of the breakdown of the certainties of binary thought in which art is defined in terms of its purity and perfection of stasis, and life, in contrast, is understood as motion, flux and action. The trials were an attempt to redefine the margins, to police the boundaries between freedom in artistic expression and the rules of social conduct. The process of the law sought to set the limits. Wilde's reverse discourse, which validated the space of between, was no real match for the discourse of the law which controlled what Michel Foucault calls this 'area of perversity' through its criminalisation and the imprisonment of offenders.¹⁰ The trials exemplified the closing-up of a transgressed boundary behind the transgressor. Only weak boundaries need active policing. Wilde's letter, harmless in itself, so long as it remained private, in its publication at his trial, exposes both the weakness of the boundary which it transgressed, and the harsh judicial process by which such an infraction was punished.

Wilde's three trials were about many different issues. They were instigated on the personal grounds of Queensberry's dislike for Wilde as a man. But they were about more than whether Wilde enjoyed sexual relationships with other men. They were also an attempt to reassert the values of middle-class masculine Englishness in the face of social and sexual practices which appeared to affirm a decadence and effeminacy which were more widespread than Wilde and his immediate circle. The key aspect at stake was the question of manliness and conduct: was Wilde a 'real' man if he wrote letters (or poems) expressing love to other men; if he deserted his wife and children to holiday with young male friends in Southern France and North Africa; if he refused to take

judicial processes seriously; if he affronted all the values — social, sexual, financial — which defined the masculine?¹¹ Furthermore, his literary works were seen as admissible evidence throughout the trials, in particular *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and ‘The Portrait of Mr. W. H.’, which was taken to suggest that Shakespeare was guilty of unnatural vice.¹² They were admissible because of the view that the relationship between text, writer and conduct was transparent, in a continuation of the tendency we have already seen in the responses by reviewers to the *Poems* of 1881, where the insincerity and shifting loyalties of the poems were evidence of a failing in the character of the poet himself.

The previous chapter showed the extent to which Wilde’s poems were seen as ‘unmanly’: in their refusal of the composite, stable and coherent version of manliness validated by earlier commentators, in their insincerity and verbal energy which refused restraint as a poetic category, they transgressed the boundaries of gender definition of the early 1880s. Wilde’s qualities were not the qualities identified as manly by his audience, as two examples from the 1880s show. In Rider Haggard’s 1885 adventure story, *King Solomon’s Mines*, the protagonist, Allan Quartermain, has the following to say about style and manliness:

It only remains for me to offer my apologies for my blunt way of writing. I can only say as an excuse that I am more accustomed to handle a rifle than a pen, and cannot make any pretence to the grand literary flights and flourishes which I seen in novels — for I sometimes read novels. I suppose that they — the flights and flourishes — are desirable, and I regret not being able to supply them; but at the same time I cannot help thinking that simple things are always the most impressive, and books are easier to understand when they are written in plain language, though I have perhaps no right to set up an opinion in such a matter. ‘A sharp spear,’ runs the Kukuana saying, ‘needs no polish’; and so on the same principle I venture to hope that a true story, no matter how strange it may be, does not require to be decked out in fine words.¹³

The admission that flights and flourishes might be desirable in the literary text is made only very grudgingly here by the man of action who only ‘sometimes’ reads novels because he is so busy being a man of action that he has neither the time nor the inclination to read them more often. He insists on the efficiency of language as its prime consideration in writing such as his; his language is efficient in the same way that a sharp spear is. If he writes clumsily it is because he is a ‘real’ man, whose sphere is

action in the warlike pursuit of empire rather than the quiet contemplation and sedentary lifestyle implied by the craft of writing. The efficiency of his style more than makes up for its plainness: truth does not require 'to be decked out in fine words', in contrast to Wilde's position where the man who calls a spade a spade should be condemned to use one. For this writer, the pen is no mightier than the sword, and the true test of manhood lies in action. Quartermain's language is no less a coded language than Wilde's; but unlike Wilde's, his language conforms to the code of acceptably masculine linguistic behaviour. He does not rely on language, preferring 'action' as his manner of self-expression.

In that example, the quality of restraint defines masculinity in writing. The manly man 'talks straight', producing a language which is intended to have a transitive function, far removed from the 'uselessness' by which Wilde characterised his own aesthetic position.¹⁴ Quartermain curtails his flights and flourishes in the interests of efficiency. His linguistic restraint mirrors other forms of restraint in his life beyond the text, making his controlled language an index of his moral character. As Ed Cohen has shown, Wilde's letter to Douglas was seen by the press and the courtroom as a similar marker of character:

the newspapers establish a homology between textual interpretation and characterological assessment. For as Wilde's words are subjected to rigorous scrutiny by both the prosecution and the defense, they form the basis for a slippage between textual meaning and authorial intention so that the imputations made against the former (in the courtroom) will become ... evidence against the latter.¹⁵

As Sir Edward Clark remarked at the trial, Wilde's letter to Douglas was not a practical letter: 'The words of that letter, gentlemen, may appear extravagant to those in the habit of writing commercial correspondence,' he told the jury. The letter gave no information and sought no action. By the measures of masculinity in terms of action, it was purely phatic. Its very lack of ostensible purpose was suggestive, nonetheless, of the qualities of the writer. The prosecution, the judge and finally the jury considered that the letter's linguistic exuberance evidenced the writer's lack of moral restraint and was evidence of his unmanliness or effeminacy.

Thus, the 'effeminate' use of language was a language which preferred the phatic to the function mode. A George du Maurier cartoon in *Punch* for March 13, 1880, shows an aesthetic art-critic, Prigsby (Oscar Wilde in a pince-nez), in full flow at an exhibition, with an attentive audience of neo-Pre-Raphaelite women, and a lone male observer, an upright, top-hatted colonel. Prigsby is shown telling his audience:

The head of Alexis is distinctly divine! Nor can I, in the whole range of Ancient, Medieval, or Modern art, recall anything quite so fair and precious; unless it be perhaps the head of that supremest masterpiece of Greek sculptchah [*sic*], the ILYSSUS, whereof indeed, in a certain gracious modelling of the lovely Neck and in the subtly delectable Curves of the Cheek and Chin, it faintly, yet most exquisitely, reminds me!¹⁶ (Figure 7)

A second picture shows the bemused colonel contemplating the (of course) headless statue. The message is clear. A man whose words are so deformed, who uses too many emotional adjectives and adverbs, is using a language which has, quite literally, no substance. The contrast between Prigsby and the listening colonel, whose very career as a soldier marks him out as the type of ideal masculinity, immediately suggests the effeminacy of such a speaker.

The 1894 parody of Wilde and his opinions and companions, Robert Hichens's *The Green Carnation*, goes much further than Du Maurier's cartoon. Here it not just that such a language has no substance; rather Hichens implies that there is a great deal of (perhaps unpalatable) substance behind the talk of Esmé Amaranth (Wilde) and Lord Reggie (Douglas). The voice of reason in the novel belongs to Lady Locke, the rich young widow of a soldier who had died in harness in India. Lady Locke, on her return to London finds herself utterly at a loss to recognise her husband's type of masculinity anywhere, and particularly in the talk of Esmé and Reggie.

Lady Locke looked at ... [Reggie] quite gravely while he was speaking. He always talked with great vivacity, and as if he meant what he were saying. ... Like most other people she felt the charm that always emanated from him. His face was tired and white, but not wicked, and there was an almost girlish beauty about it. He flushed easily, and was obviously sensitive to impressions. ... Mr. Amaranth and Lord Reggie were specimens of manhood totally strange to her — until now, she had not realised that such people existed.¹⁷

The man who is so evidently 'sensitive to impressions' is not to be trusted. Reggie, who amongst other things, is a poet, is also 'girlish', and makes a point of marking his

artificiality (or unnaturalness) by his adoption of the eponymous green carnation. Lady Locke does not understand the precise meaning of the flower (and the novel never makes its meaning transparent), but she instinctively knows that she does not like it: 'The men who wore them,' she says, 'all looked the same. They had the same walk, or rather waggle, the same coyly conscious expression, the same wavy motion of the hand. When they spoke to each other, they called each other by Christian names.'¹⁸ She sees that Amaranth is the leader of the group of young men, and disapproves of him precisely because he replaces the life of a man of action with words: 'I don't care to hear the opinions of Mr. Amaranth', she comments. 'His epigrams are his opinions. His actions are performed vicariously in conversation. If he were to be silent, he would cease to live.'¹⁹ Her view in the novel confirms the connections between manliness, action, and linguistic efficiency as ideals, on the one hand, and the decadent associations of effeminacy, linguistic excess and inaction on the other.

The second matrix of associations are all present in the poem, *The Sphinx*, which Wilde published in 1894: the first edition of the poem was illustrated by Charles Ricketts and dedicated 'To Marcel Schwob in Friendship and Admiration.' At the time of its publication, Wilde was reaching the height of his powers and his fame, and although the conception of the poem was around twenty years old (he had begun to write it around 1874²⁰), its appearance in 1894 implies that Wilde still saw it as relevant to his more mature aesthetic concerns.

The poem narrates the variety of moods and associations evoked by a statuette or paperweight in the shape of the sphinx in the mind of its young student owner. The sphinx's perverse shape — between woman and beast — inspires a range of ideas, historical, geographical, philosophical and sensual. One of Wilde's typical techniques in all his more sustained verse was to use whatever stimulus the subject matter afforded as a *raison d'être* for a series of lists which range way beyond the original stimulus. In this case, the poem ranges as far as possible from the exigencies of the here and now. It is a poem of contrasts and oppositions in which, for example, the poetic persona's

relative youth ('I have scarcely seen some twenty summers') is placed in opposition to the sphinx's ancient wisdoms and experiences: 'A thousand weary centuries are thine'²¹ (291). The speaker believes that his proximity to this ancient object will enable him to gain privileged access to the secrets of her past. Through her we will see the love affairs of Antony and Cleopatra and Venus and Adonis; he will see the flight into Egypt of the Holy Family, and the love of Hadrian for Antinous, a range of loves which covers everything from adultery to family love to same-sex desire. Touching her ('put your head upon my knee!/And let me stroke your throat' [290]) will put him 'in touch' with the wealth of sexual experience, both bizarre and perverse, which may have been hers:

Who were your lovers? who were they who wrestled for you in the dust?
Which was the vessel of your Lust? What Leman had you, every day?

Did giant lizards come and crouch before you on the reedy banks?
Did Gryphons with great metal flanks leap on you in your trampled couch?

Did monstrous hippopotami come sidling toward you in the mist?
Did gilt-scaled dragons writhe and twist with passion as you passed them by?
(295)

These speculations include lovers in more human forms, and then the lovers amongst the gods, until the poetic persona decides that the only worthy lover for her must have been Ammon, the Libyan Jupiter.

The poet spends about a quarter of the poem (21 out of 87 stanzas) in his consideration of this love affair between the sphinx and Ammon before he begins to weary of the scenes which his own imagination has created. He demands that the sphinx return to Egypt where she will be able to reassemble her lost lover from the pieces of statuary which lie scattered in the sands like Shelley's image of Ozymandias:

Go, seek his fragments on the moor and wash them in the evening dew,
And from their pieces make anew thy mutilated paramour!

...

Away to Egypt! Have no fear. Only one God has ever died.
Only one god has let His side be wounded by a soldier's spear. (304-5)

Eventually the pleasures of the text's wild imaginings come to be reinscribed, first as weariness (a decadent *ennui* brought about by the exhaustion of the imagination), and

then as pain and fear. The very quality which first attracts the poet to the sphinx, her durability, leads in the end to his disgust with her.

False Sphinx! False Sphinx! By reedy Styx old Charon, leaning on his oar,
Waits for my coin. Go thou before, and leave me to my crucifix,

Whose pallid burden, sick with pain, watches the world with wearied eyes,
And weeps for every soul that dies, and weeps for every soul in vain. (309-10)

Her ironic look eventually outstares the poet, who turns instead to Christianity and, presumably, specifically to Catholicism, since the focus is on the cross. In contrast to the Sphinx's immutability, Christ is sick with pain, weary and weeping in vain for those who worship him, implying that belief in this God is no more efficacious than belief in the Pagan gods of the past. The poet's attraction to Christ, that is, has more to do with aesthetics and desire than with religious commitment. 'Mr. Wilde's crucifix is no less an artistic property than his nenuphars and monoliths,' said the anonymous reviewer in the *Pall Mall Budget*.²² As Eve Sedgwick notes, images of Jesus have 'a unique position in modern culture as images of the unclothed or unclothable male body, often in extremis and/or ecstasy, prescriptively meant to be gazed at and adored. The scandal of such a figure within a homophobic economy of the male gaze doesn't seem to abate: efforts to disembody this body ... only entangle it the more compromisingly amongst various figurations of the homosexual.'²³ Thus, even whilst he admires the body of Christ crucified, he is speaking of a desire to replace the desire for the sphinx's perverse female body, not with a will to believe, since his Christ 'weeps for every soul in vain.' He has no expectation of eternal life after death; the figure of Charon implies Hades, not a Christian heaven.

The Sphinx is a poem about and of deferral. The arcane vocabulary defers the reader's (and perhaps the poetic persona's) extraction of meaning; the inordinately long, internally rhymed lines dramatise that deferral, putting off closure. It is a poem based on contradictory impulses — it shows the frenzy which the poet's imagination has engendered, and at the same time as rendering his inability to act on his imaginings. But there is no return to the 'norm' after this frenzy: there is no possible restoration of order through narrative, since the poem resists closure, and thereby resists the complete

understanding of the state of mind which engendered it. There are no limits left to transgress: the poet has crossed boundaries, like Charmides, between sacred and profane, between 'normal' and 'perverse', between the past and the present, and between art and life. The poem collapses from exhaustion after an excess of experience, experience which is neither end-directed, nor predicated on cause and effect. The philosophy implied by the manner of the poem is one which Wilde might well have learned from the poetic technique of Swinburne.²⁴ What Swinburne valued, suggests Isobel Armstrong, was a poetics of excess, which placed value on 'the wasteful, exorbitant expenditure of energy in violation and transgression.' Such poetics 'assert a plenitude which recognises no limit.'²⁵ In *The Sphinx*, Wilde also wrote himself into a position of withdrawal from the economy of cause and effect. In this context, arousal does not lead to consummation, but only to increased arousal, and finally to frustration. As Regenia Gagnier has commented, *The Sphinx* is usually seen as the 'quintessentially decadent poem — in the sense of exhausted, erethistic, and esoteric.' It is:

a textbook-complete catalogue ... of polymorphous perversity. The poem is a poem of excess in the sense that the object of desire is technically absent; the desire compulsively flows from the subject's brain. But the consummate mastery, the *style*, of having the shy beloved *seduce himself*, must be admired.²⁶

The poem, that is, is in part a masturbatory fantasy, associating another form of unmanliness, in the sense of an unproductive sexuality, with exhaustion and linguistic excess.

Since the object of desire is absent, the only outlet for desire is linguistic. The poet talks himself to a standstill, using words to replace the actions which they describe, and which he would presumably like to perform. Instead of acting his adventures, like Allen Quartermain, the poet just talks about them. And since language is his only outlet, and since the actions which he wishes to perform are at once 'unspeakable', impossible and excessive, so too are the words in which he expresses his desire. This language has nothing to do with the efficiency of communication; in the substitution of words for deeds, the poem insists on the pleasure of words alone, to which extent, the poem, like Wilde's letter to Douglas, is phatic.

The poem, rather surprisingly, received mostly neutral or favourable reviews. Most critics commented on the poem's modified use (or abuse) of the stanzaic form of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. W. E. Henley felt that it was merely a typographical nicety — 'a special stroke of art' — which made Wilde print quatrains as couplets, and the reviewer for the *Athenaeum* saw the form of the poem as evidence of Wilde's 'cynical humour.'²⁷ But despite its peculiarities of form and content, unlike his letters to Alfred Douglas, this poem did not form part of the evidence against Wilde at his trials. On the other hand, it shares many of the features of the texts which were used as evidence of his guilt. Like the letter, and like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it gives voice to actions which should not be spoken, and should certainly not be performed. In a context in which, as Frank Mort argues, all sexual activity was referenced as 'sexual immorality',²⁸ the variety of loves (including masturbation and homosexuality) which dared not speak their names, were rendered immoral because they were unmanly and unproductive. Wilde dared to speak the name (and act the pleasure) of his own desires; he got away with it up to the point when word and deed were 'proved' in a court of law to be intimately connected. Revenge was exacted on his person and on his writings; his plays were swiftly withdrawn from the West End theatres on his conviction. The linguistic pleasure which he took in his creations, and which he invited his audience to share, was harmless so long as it was not precisely understood. Whilst he could rely on the ignorance of an audience who did not find 'ugly meanings in beautiful things,' the literature was more or less safe. The link between sexual and textual significance could be ignored. But once 'prove' the relationship between the two, and once name the version of sexuality as 'gross indecency', and not only is the writer implicated, but so is the reader. Reading Wilde meant that one shared in his transgressions of the limits of decency — that one could be read as decadent, effeminate and finally, criminal.

Wilde was not convicted for writing poetry, but it would be naive to assume that his disgrace was brought about purely on the grounds of his activities with renters and telegraph boys. If those crimes were deemed so appalling, it is doubtful that he would have been afforded so many opportunities to escape their legal consequences. This was

also clearly a trial about policing the boundaries of acceptable sexual behaviour, which were intimately connected with the boundaries of acceptable textual practice. The judge, in his final address to the convicted Wilde, could not bring himself even to speak of Wilde's crimes: 'the crime of which you have been convicted is so bad that one has to put stern restraint upon oneself to prevent oneself from describing, in language which I would rather not use, the sentiments which must rise to the breast of every man of honour who has heard the details of these two terrible trials.'²⁹ The judge maintained a distance between himself and the accused, when he spoke of the 'crimes' both periphrastically and impersonally, as though the very speaking of forbidden words would implicate or pollute him by association.

On 25 May, 1895, Wilde was found guilty under 'the 11th section of the Criminal Law Amendment Act [1885], and served two years penal servitude.'³⁰ He served his sentence, relieved only by one or two special privileges (he was, for example eventually allowed to read and write in his cell), and by the visits of his very few remaining friends, including the most faithful of them all, Robert Ross.³¹ It is said that during one of Ross's visits to Wilde in prison, he recited to Wilde some of the poems from A. E. Housman's recently published *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), poems which he had learned by heart to offer to his friend.³² As visits were both rare and short (once every three months for twenty minutes), and closely policed, Ross must have felt strongly about these poems.

It is difficult to think of a greater contrast than that between the poetry of Wilde and Housman. Where Wilde is verbose, pleasure-seeking, list-making and adventurous in form and substance, Housman is restrained, restricted, seemingly loyal to the landscape and the Romantic poetic traditions of England. *A Shropshire Lad*, though not an immediate success, received a range of favourable responses from the press. The *Times* reviewer for 27 March, 1896 commented that Housman had struck 'a decidedly original note,' and that he had a gift for 'melodious expression.' R. P. Graves quotes at length the review which apparently gave Housman the most pleasure, in which Hubert Bland praised Housman's achievement of an 'essentially and distinctively new

poetry', in which 'the individual voice rings out true and clear'. *A Shropshire Lad* represented the 'direct expression of elemental emotions, of heart-thoughts', and was only at fault in as much as the poems lacked 'gladness'.³³

The beauty of the verse was, however, only one of Ross's likely motives for introducing this poetry to Wilde. For the poems not only have a lyric beauty, but they also contain a strategy, which Ross might have hoped Wilde would be able to adapt for his purposes, for negotiating between the sincere expression of emotion, and the public's sense of decorum. Whilst Housman shared Wilde's fascination with youth and male beauty, his poems are so tightly controlled that any message is only just stated, and is never expanded. In *The Sphinx* Wilde's speaker had contrasted his own youth with the sphinx's wealth of experience, but his youth was no index of his own innocence. Wilde's persona was able to imagine a mass of possibilities; and having imagined them, he expressed them in such a way as to indicate not only verbal virtuosity, but also (implicitly) a range of experience which has fed his vocabulary. Even if that experience is only imagined, it nonetheless suggests a mind full of 'ugly meanings'. Wilde's poem feels extravagant and exuberant. In utter contrast, Housman constantly narrows the field of expression. In the second of the collection's poems, he too claims to be only twenty: 'Now of my threescore years and ten,/Twenty will not come again.'³⁴ But the urgency of time passing is not expressed by the need to have and to write of many experiences; rather, Housman's persona is satisfied by the prospect of having the same (pleasurable emotion) over and over again:

And take from seventy springs a score,
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs is little room,
About the woodland I will go,
To see the cherry hung with snow.(24)

There is no decadent exhaustion or *ennui* here; Housman's poetry is satisfied with simple pleasures expressed in simple language.

Housman limits the scope for emotion in a poetic form whose very vocabulary and structure are pared to the minimum. Where Wilde's lines spilled over in the

excitement of what they were saying, Housman's are quite rigorously end-stopped by the strength of mostly monosyllabic rhymes. The effect is of the seeming simplicity of verse written for children. It conveys an impression of innocence which is in complete opposition to Wilde's 'experience' and 'guilt'. It exhibits the virtues of middle-class masculine restraint. The poems are also conceptually limited. The urgency of passing time is expressed in a vocabulary which is both small and 'ordinary'. It is rooted in the solidity of its woodland surroundings by the words which describe them: trees, cherry, bloom, bough and woodland. The second stanza does take the reader away from the wood into a more abstract concept of time, but the return to the landscape is immediate and complete, so that the first and last stanzas are virtual mirror images of each other: the poet returns to the 'cherry hung with snow,' which, in the first stanza has been the 'loveliest of trees ... / Wearing white for Eastertide.'

But as Ross perhaps felt in reading these poems, there is a serpent in this Eden. The *carpe diem* theme of 'Loveliest of Trees' is closer to the concerns of Wilde's wordly-wise urban seeker of pleasure than seems to be the case at first sight. It is a gentler, understated version of Pater's credo that one must turn one's life into art: 'Not the fruit of experience, but the experience itself, is the end. ... To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.'³⁵ Even for Housman, it appears, one must live regardless of the consequences of living, with no concern for chains of cause and effect.

The argument continues as to whether Housman was technically as 'guilty' as Wilde under Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, but his 'emotional guilt' can scarcely be doubted. 'As everyone knows, Housman's thing had more to do with slaughtered soldiers, Shropshire rough trade and luxuriant misery' than with 'the heart of man', comments Francis Spufford rather crudely. At Oxford, Housman had met and admired the athletic and brilliant Moses Jackson, 'who went off to India to become a rather ordinary married headmaster, while Housman spent the rest of his days carving "AEH 4 MJ" into every poetic tree trunk he came across.'³⁶ Spufford is, of course, wrong. Not everyone knew of Housman's same-sex attachments. Some suspected, and

others, probably including Ross, guessed: not even Housman's homosexual brother, Laurence, was made the repository of a positive disclosure, though 'he would certainly have received a sympathetic hearing in that quarter.'³⁷ It was only after Housman's death in 1936 that his sexual preferences became widely 'known'. His poetry could, however, never have been evidence for a prosecution in court of law, as Wilde's partially was. As Neil Bartlett has pointed out, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 'a dictionary without a peer,' defines love as being 'that feeling of attachment which is based upon difference of sex ... used specifically with reference to love between the sexes'. Bartlett wonders if the editor knew what he was doing 'when he cited a quotation from ... *A Shropshire Lad* as one of his authorities on the subject: "Oh when I was in love with you, then was I clean and brave."³⁸ It is a rhetorical question, and the answer must surely be 'no', given that the 'L' section of the dictionary was compiled between 1901 and 1903, too soon after the Wilde trials for any open identification with same-sex love to be expressed in a work which literally defined English(ness).

A Shropshire Lad is a collection of short lyric poems which deal with issues such as natural and human beauty, the landscape and rural life. Its major reference point is to the tradition of the tragic ballad, in which love is lost, either through death or through other kinds of enforced separation. Its landscapes are peopled by lads (and sometimes lasses) who are closely involved with that landscape, either because they work there as labourers, or because they have been forced to leave it — as soldiers, criminals or dead men. There is a range of voices, from the apparently simple lyric enjoyment of the countryside in 'Loveliest of Trees', to more philosophical and pained speakers who mourn the loss of brothers, lovers and friends. The love which informs so many of the poems, be it for comrade or sweetheart, is consistently doomed or fatal.

The collection is informed by the fear of emotional commitment since love is constantly lost or sacrificed; the innocent enthusiasm of 'Loveliest of Trees' is repeatedly betrayed. The love of nature is the only love without emotional risk, unlike other kinds of emotional attachment. The poems numbered XII to XVIII each show the

dangers to the poetic voice of seizing various forms of experience which go beyond the pleasure of the landscape. In XII he watches the world go by in full knowledge that his own place in the world is only temporary. He feels the urgency of getting involved with life, despite his revulsion against its passions:

If the heats of hate and lust
In the house of flesh are strong,
Let me mind the house of dust
Where my sojourn will be long. (34)

Life, even with all its faults, is better than death where 'the bridegroom all night through/ Never turns him to the bride.' Macabre images of life and death are immediately followed by the light-hearted ditty, 'When I was one and twenty,' where a young bachelor lad is warned of the dangers of love. He ignores the admonition, but in the ironic light of one more year's experience, he agrees that the advice to withdraw from emotional attachment was sound after all:

'The heart out of the bosom
Was never given in vain;
'Tis paid with sighs a plenty
And sold for endless rue.'
And I am two and twenty,
And oh, 'tis true, tis true. (35)

Any attempt to live life to the full, across the range of experience, suggest the poem, albeit jauntily, is not after all worth the pain it causes. Poem XIV, 'There pass the careless people,' reiterates this theme. The man 'that gives to man or woman/ His heart and soul away' is not just a fool, but probably a damned fool.

Ah, past the plunge of plummet,
In seas I cannot sound,
My heart and soul and senses,
World without end, are drowned.

He is left at the end of the poem 'Sea-deep, till doomsday morning' when his heart and soul are utterly lost. (36)

The choice between action and contemplation is shown in *A Shrophshire Lad's* accumulated contradictions to be an impossible choice. None of the solutions offered has universal application. Each is strictly limited to the poem in which it appears. One

possible option is refuse the choice altogether as in XXX: 'Others, I am not the first,/Have willed more mischief than they durst'; this proves, however, to be an illusory option, as the speaking persona is tortured even in the grave by the fire and ice which represent the binary poles of the choice he will not make:

But from my grave across my brow
Plays no wind of healing now,
And fire and ice within me fight
Beneath the suffocating light. (54)

At other times the suicide's decisive choice is praised:

Shot? so quick, so clean an ending?
Oh that was right, lad, that was brave:
Yours was not an ill for mending,
'Twas best to take it to the grave. (70)³⁹

The speaker envies the dead man's ability to have made a decision which is so final, and which has the added bonus of preventing public shame for the 'ill' he suffered from, the precise nature of which is absent and unstated in the poem. But most of all he is to be envied for his achievement of utter unconsciousness: 'Turn safe to rest, no dreams no waking.' The poem is a memorial gift to a decision acted upon: it turns action into words. But soon, that praise is withdrawn by the return of a *carpe diem* cheeriness as in XLIX, where it is the unconsciousness gained through camaraderie — 'jesting, dancing, drinking' — which is favoured since thought or self-consciousness are so dangerous to the constitution of the self: ''tis only thinking/Lays lads underground' (75).

The keyword which defines Housman's poetry is restraint, and this is one reason why his poetry would never have landed him in court. It never overtly transgresses any limits. Although the positions it adopts are inconsistent, unlike Wilde's *Poems*, there is no sense that inconsistency is a self-dramatising pose. The judge at Wilde's final trial felt obliged to speak of sexuality periphrastically ('the crime of which you stand convicted ...') and impersonally. His use of the personal pronoun 'one' represents his own withdrawal from the arena of possible corruption. Housman's poetry shares that linguistic circumspection. Wilde, we might say, was convicted at

least in part on a premise of his own making. If, as he argued, life has its supremest moments when it is lived as art, he should not have been surprised when his own art was used against him as evidence of his life. In crossing the boundary between the two spheres, he found that the interpretations of the one were the same as the interpretation of the other. Housman, on the other hand, maintained what Christopher Ricks calls a *cordon sanitaire* between his poetry and the rest of his life.⁴⁰ In his lecture, 'The Name and Nature of Poetry', delivered towards the end of his life in 1933, Housman was very clear on the dangers involved in mixing up life with art:

Experience has taught me, when I am shaving of a morning, to keep watch over my thoughts, because, if a line of poetry strays into my memory, my skin bristles so that the razor ceases to act. This particular symptom is accompanied by a shiver down the spine; there is another which consists in a constriction of the throat and a precipitation of water to the eyes.⁴¹

Mixing poetry with practice seems, for Housman, to have involved physical danger. He therefore took the decision to police his own boundaries ('to keep watch over my thoughts') and to enact a radical separation of the different aspects of his life.

Housman's poetry shares with Wilde's the theme of world-weariness. Sometimes he spoke this theme directly, sometimes he dramatised it in poems which evince sympathy and brotherhood with the alienated — the enlisted soldier, the criminal, the betrayed lover and the suicide. He, like Wilde, uses their alienation to speak of his own, but unlike Wilde, his messages are coded in such a way as not to invite a 'curious construction' to be put on them. As Julia Kristeva has argued, 'poetic language is a "double"' in which it is impossible finally to fix meaning, leaving the possibility of 'curious constructions' ever open. It is double in its division of the writing subject into a subject of enunciation and a subject of utterance, writer and persona.⁴² But there are degrees of doubleness, degrees of difficulty in sorting out the relationship between the real and ostensible speakers of a poem's words, between writer and text. In Wilde's poetry, the boundary between personality and persona is constantly transgressed. Following the publication of the *Poems* of 1881, he went to a lot of trouble to cultivate a series of public personae in his 'real' life which might also stand for the various personae of his poetry. In America, in an act of self-parody, he

played a very deliberate version of the aesthete-about-town; in life, as in his early art, he represented not stable middle-class manly virtue, but a series of dramatic poses. By 1894, when he published *The Sphinx*, he had made his name as a man who turned his life into art; and in that poem, it is clear that the technical and linguistic ingenuity are supposed to be understood by the reader as related to the brilliance of the man: signifier and signified collapse into each other. If the poem is successful in its move to '*épater le bourgeois*', then it is a dazzling triumph for the man as well. The reader is able without difficulty to read the code of transparent equivalence between the subjects of utterance and enunciation.

Housman's poems on the other hand appear to invite only the simplest forms of poetic pleasure, those of familiar stanzaic forms, unpretentious rhythms, easy rhymes and a simple conceptual framework. A reader would have to work at being shocked or dazzled by *A Shropshire Lad* — unless, that is, s/he was 'in the know' about the particular code he was using. There is abundant evidence in the collection of an homoerotic content. There is the succession of young male speakers, and, more particularly, the prevalence of private soldiers (rather than officers) among them which may have provided a clue to the collection's emotional allegiance.⁴³ For those with access to the code, the insistent references to young male persons as 'lads' might have been evidence too; it emphasises both maleness and youth, often twin reference points of the homoerotic. (Wilde's equivalent term was 'boy', as it is used in the letter to Douglas, and the prosecution noted this mode of address, and commented on it unfavourably at the first criminal trial.⁴⁴) Housman's insistent combination of pleasure for the moment with his overwhelming sense of the possibly fatal consequences of pleasurable action is another indicator. (The majority of the poems were, after all, written in the first five months of 1895, including the period of the Wilde trials: 'From Wenlock Edge, he could see as far as Reading Gaol,' wrote Desmond MacCarthy.⁴⁵) But Housman's poetry allows all these possible indicators to be read 'straight'; it invites readings acceptable to dominant cultural forces at least as much as it invites counter-cultural readings. And in the context of the immediate aftermath of the Wilde trials, it

would have been a brave reviewer indeed who would have insisted on the doubleness of possible readings of *A Shropshire Lad*. To have done so would have been to admit that the reader had himself access to the code, that he knew of the possible existence of 'ugly meanings' in beautiful things, and that he knew how to speak 'the love that dare not speak its name.' Housman had found a way of not calling a spade a spade, whilst still leaving sufficient clues for the initiated to perceive or half-create other readings.

On his release, Wilde received evidence that Housman had at least sympathised with his plight when he received from the author a copy of *A Shropshire Lad*. The gift was gratefully accepted by Wilde who wrote to Laurence Housman on 9 August, 1897 that 'I have lately been reading your brother's lovely lyrical poems'; in a later letter (22 August), he praised Housman's 'light lyrical beauty ... and delicate felicity of mood and music'. He went on to announce to Laurence his own latest literary project:

With regard to what you ask me about myself — well, I am occupied in finishing a poem, terribly realistic for me, and drawn from actual experience, a sort of denial of my own philosophy of art in many ways. I hope it is good, but every night, I hear cocks crowing in Berneval, so I am afraid I have denied myself, and would weep bitterly if I had not wept away all my tears. I will send it to you, if you allow me, when it appears.⁴⁶

The poem to which Wilde refers here was *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, his last literary production which was eventually published in February, 1898.

Wilde hoped that the ballad would go some way towards rehabilitating his reputation, both as an artist and as a man. He wanted to show that the years in prison had not destroyed him. In that hope the poem was, at best, only partially successful. Wilde was not able to throw off public opprobrium for his crimes, and he knew that he would never be able to walk the streets of England again; even the volume's relative financial success was not enough to re-make the man. It was first published under the pseudonym C.3.3. (Wilde's prison number), and his own name was not appended to it until its success was assured.

The reviews received by *The Ballad* were generally favourable, though many found things of which to disapprove in the poem. Once again, as with the 1881 *Poems*, for example, a range of influences was noted, including Thomas Hood's 'The

Dream of Eugene Aram, the Murderer,' Kipling's *Barrack Room Ballads* and Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.⁴⁷ In 1916, Wilde's friend and eventually notoriously unreliable biographer, Frank Harris, added Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* to the list of possible sources and influences.⁴⁸ His grounds for this identification, apart from the fact that he knew that Wilde had at least read Housman's poems, was the similarity between *A Shropshire Lad*, IX, 'On moonlit heath and lonesome bank,' and the *Ballad*. Housman's poem tells of the feelings of an outside observer on the night before the hanging of a young man in Shrewsbury prison.

They hang us now in Shrewsbury jail;
And whistles blow forlorn,
And trains all night groan on the rail
To men that die at morn.

There sleeps in Shrewsbury jail tonight,
Or wakes, as may betide,
A better lad, if things went right,
Than most who sleep outside. (31)

Like Wilde's, Housman's poem implicitly connects the guilt of the condemned man to the guilt of mankind as a whole. The injustice of killing one man for a crime, which metaphorically or literally, everyone commits, is at the heart of Wilde's *Ballad*:

For each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword! (316)

The guilt of the particular case is symptomatic of general guilt. Housman too feels the force of the connection between the condemned and the free: 'They hang *us* now in Shrewsbury jail.' And both poems dwell on the detailed horror of the process of execution to emphasise the point that the cruelty of hanging is escaped by most people as a matter of good luck, not good judgement.

And naked to the hangman's noose
The morning clocks will ring
A neck God made for other use
Than strangling with a string.

And sharp the link of life will snap,
And dead on air will stand

Heels that held up as straight a chap
As treads upon the land.

The comparison between these lines and Wilde's own description of the hanging needs little comment:

It is sweet to dance to violins
When Love and Life are fair:
To dance to flutes, to dance to lutes,
Is delicate and fair:
But it is not sweet with nimble feet
To dance upon the air! (322)

Wilde dwells also on the 'swollen purple throat,/And stark and staring eyes' three times over in the poem.

There remains, however, a marked difference between Housman's form of restraint, and the restraint of Wilde's new poetic voice. Housman's poems avoid what Arthur Symonds called Wilde's 'poetic diction' (for example, the flutes and lutes quoted above),⁴⁹ and he does not use the kinds of rhetorical effects on which the *Ballad* is predicated. So, for instance, Housman leaves unstated any precise description of what his condemned man has done, and what he has left behind. The world outside the jail, the pastoral landscape where 'the careless shepherd once would keep/The flocks by moonlight' is simultaneously an evocation of innocence and a grim metaphor for hanging: 'Hanging in chains was called keeping sheep by moonlight,' is Housman's own note to the poem. The Christian associations of the shepherd, the innocent victim/sacrifice conflated with the caring keeper, need no elaboration in his restrained and economic poetic voice.

For Wilde in contrast, there is a need to express, albeit in negative terms, precisely what has been sacrificed. The rhetorical repeated refrains of the poem refer us to both the general and the particular cases. What the soldier 'did not' do ('he did not wear his scarlet coat') is linked to what does not happen to the rest of mankind, despite the universality of guilt: though each man kills the thing he loves, 'Yet each man does not die.'

He does not die a death of shame
On a day of dark disgrace,

Nor have a noose about his neck,
 Nor a cloth upon his face,
 Nor drop feet foremost through the floor
 Into an empty space.(317)

The repeated negatives emphasise the contrast between the expectations of innocent and guilty men. Where the prisoner's horizons have been limited to 'the little tent of blue', those of the free man are unbounded; where the condemned man waits only for the macabre simplicity of death as expressed in the above stanza and dramatised by its quietly violent, monosyllabic language, the free man has unlimited possibilities. By dwelling on the brutality of one life and death, Wilde points the contrast between this and the pleasures available to other, equally guilty men.

Housman only wants us to recognise his fellowship with the man in Shrewsbury jail. The link between innocent and guilty is limited to the single pronoun 'us'. Wilde, on the other hand, wants to explore his own paradoxical relationship with the doomed soldier. He recognises their shared guilt ('for each man kills the thing he loves'), but feels at the same time alienated from it, and it is the loss of certainty in the opposition between innocence and guilt that he wants his readers to share:

And I and all the other souls in pain
 Who tramped the other ring,
 Forgot if we ourselves had done
 A great or little thing,
 And watched with gaze of dull amaze
 The man who had to swing.

And strange it was to see him pass
 With a step so light and gay,
 And strange it was to see him look
 So wistfully at the day,
 And strange it was to think that he
 Had such a debt to pay. (321)

This alienation, the forgetting of self though an experience made strange turns the soldier's life and death into art. Romance and realism are combined in the poem. Wilde himself said in a letter to Robert Ross that it 'suffers under the difficulty of a divided aim. Some is realistic, some romantic: some poetry, some propaganda. I feel it keenly, but as a whole I think the production interesting: that it is interesting from more points of view than one is artistically to be regretted.'⁵⁰

These doubts notwithstanding, the concerns of the successful and carefree Wilde of 1894 can still be recognised in the more circumspect poet of 1898. 'The first duty of life is to be as artificial as possible,' Wilde had written in his 'Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Very Young'; 'What the second duty is, no one has yet discovered.'⁵¹ *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is poignant at least in part because it enunciates the recognition that life only reaches the heights of art at its moments of supreme jeopardy — when it nears its end. It is the soldier who achieves artistic status in the poem, not the poetic persona who is baffled by the inartistic surroundings of the prison: 'The difficulty is that the objects in prison have no shape or form,' Wilde told Ross. The objects in prison are not, that is, artistic. To that extent at least, the poem inscribes the failure of Wilde's philosophy which is no longer applicable to his own life. For Housman, the incompatibility of the disappointments of life and the perfection of art is a matter for resignation, and provides both the subject matter and the tone for his verse. But for Wilde, that incompatibility remains the most urgent problem of life, and it demands action to resolve it: the failure to resolve the tension between reality and romance is, for him, the failure of life.

The Ballad in Wilde's own terms, therefore, is both a betrayal of his artistic philosophy and consequently an artistic failure. For the first time in his writing career, Wilde had written something with an explicit social purpose as well as an aesthetic one. As Arthur Symonds commented, it was a 'plea on behalf of prison reform, and so far as it is written with that aim, it is not art.'⁵² The expression of real experience, rather than the imaginatively reconstructed experience of his earlier volume of *Poems*, or the position adopted by the speaking persona in *The Sphinx*, does not 'conceal the artist', and allows the text/writer homology to be easily understood; the subject of enunciation — the real man who had experienced appalling prison conditions — is too easily conflated with the constructed poetic persona. In those terms, according to Wilde's own earlier position, the poem is not 'art' since it does not aim to be 'essentially useless' or phatic, as his earlier work had done. It aims to persuade his audience that

the prison system is brutal, that the audience itself is implicated in that brutality, and that therefore, we must all seek change:

This too I know — and wise it were
 If each could know the same —
 That every prison that men build
 Is built with bricks of shame,
 And bound with bars lest Christ should see
 How men their brothers maim. ...

For they starve the little frightened child
 Till it weeps both night and day;
 And they scourge the weak, and flog the fool
 And gibe the old and grey,
 And some grow mad, and all grow bad,
 And none a word may say. (340-341)

The last line refers firstly to a prison regulation which literally imposed silence on the inmates, but it also refers to the project of the poem itself, in which Wilde seeks to speak the unspeakable, using his articulate art to attack a *status quo* against which 'none a word may say.'

Wilde may or may not have consciously imitated the techniques of *A Shropshire Lad*, but it seems likely that Housman's poems were in his mind when he first conceived the *Ballad*. The simplified language and rigorously observed stanzaic forms seem to owe much to Housman, as perhaps does the choice of dramatic incident which the poem narrates. But maybe the resemblance ends there, and the remaining differences in the poetry are indicative of the differences in the personalities of the two poets. Wilde's life is well known, and his story is retold many times. The pattern of the spectacular rise and equally spectacular fall give him the mythological status of a Greek tragic hero or Christian martyr.⁵³ He was an egoist, a gregarious lover of life who tried to make the love of life into his artistic career. He did not believe in the boundaries between art and life, and never tried to keep within them.

Housman, on the other hand, had a personality which, says Bevis Hillier, was 'half-military, half academic.' Discussing his diary entries on the subject of Moses Jackson, another commentator says: 'Poignant, indeed they are; but it is the poignancy of iron reticence; everything has to be read between the lines.'⁵⁴ Housman's poetry is an arena in which public perceptions of masculinity meet poetry; the stiff upper lip

comes into quiet contact with the emotions which it is supposed to conceal. The poetry both speaks and restrains emotion, dramatises its own restraint. As such, Housman's poetry speaks the dominant language of masculinity, as it is identified by James Eli Adams. His poetry is reserved or restrained; but this is a masculine reserve which is displayed and, as such, it 'characterises a subject in relation to an audience.'⁵⁵

Wilde never learned the art of understatement. Despite Housman's lessons in reserve, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* has a certain stridency about it, and even friendly contemporary critics felt that it said too much. 'From 109 stanzas,' wrote one reviewer, 'we should like to remove some fifty,'⁵⁶ and when Yeats included it in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* in the 1930s, he did indeed cut it.⁵⁷ No one ever accused Wilde of an iron reticence, and his last poem does not reassert the masculine values of cause and effect, of style and substance, which were, after all, the defining values of the world which had caught and punished the poet himself. It is because it says too much that the poem remains a decadent poem.

Wilde hoped (and feared) that his poem had 'out-Kiplinged Henley',⁵⁸ meaning that it represented the brutal realities of the masculine world as Kipling and Henley also did. At least one critic believed that he had utterly failed in this aim:

The most remarkable poem that has appeared this year is, of course, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. It has been much written about, but no-one has commented... on the curious parallel between it and Mr. Kipling's 'Danny Deeever', the grim lyric which stands first in *Barrack Room Ballads*. The difference is just this: 'Danny Deeever' — ugly, if you like, but a real poem — is a conspicuously manly piece of work; *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, with all its feverish energy, is unmanly. The central emotion is the physical horror of death, when death comes, not as a relief or in a whirl of excitement, but as an abrupt shock to be dreaded. That the emotion is genuine admits of no doubt; but it is one very fit to be concealed. ... If we were to judge poems by the test that Plato proposes — whether they will tend to strengthen or enervate — we should put this poem very low indeed.⁵⁹

This review is interesting because of its reprise of the criticisms which Wilde's early poetry had also suffered. It is unmanly and derivative; and whilst it is now sincere, the emotion which it describes is an unfit emotion for a real man to have.

Wilde could not, following his conviction, shake off the accusation that his literary works were unmanly. This is not so much a function of what *The Ballad of*

Reading Gaol is about, but of the fact that it was an open secret that Wilde had written it.⁶⁰ The man and not the text is the object of critical attention. After the trial, as during it, text and writer were rendered inseparable; the man had a criminal record for ‘unmanliness’ — with the inexorable consequence that his work continued to attract the same accusation. Housman’s life, on the other hand, was to all intents a blameless one; his poetry reflects the restraint that he put on himself — but more importantly, restraint is also reflected in the responses which his audiences had to his work. His combination of academic and military virtues in his life reflected credit back on his work: or would have done, if anyone had cared to make explicit the connection between Professor Housman and the Shropshire Lad.

Housman’s version of poetic masculinity has been dismissed as adolescent. George Orwell comments, for instance, on his ‘unvarying sexual pessimism (the girl always dies or marries someone else) [which] seemed like wisdom to boys who were herded together in public schools and were half-inclined to think of women as something unattainable. Whether Housman ever had the same appeal for girls, I rather doubt.’⁶¹ What Orwell saw as sexual pessimism was read by Housman’s own contemporaries as restraint: the passions in general, and the homoerotic in particular, are held inside boundaries, both metrically and emotionally: there is no possibility of their expression becoming a threat to either the poet or the man. The boundaries are held in place, finally unquestioned and unthreatened, and there is no need for external policing. The sympathies evinced by Housman’s poetry for the outcast are left as generalised expressions of human sympathy for the world at large. Wilde, in contrast, makes his sympathies explicit, local and particular. His outcast has a past, an identifiable existence, and his poetic alignment is therefore based not only on a principle of brotherhood or generalised connections between mankind as a whole: it is personalised and permits therefore a reading based on a personal commitment to a specific person. Moreover, linguistically, *The Ballad* maintains a language which is unconnected with action. Its ‘poetic diction’ and its length are not indicative of lessons learned in restraint. In Wilde’s case, the ‘discourse of the frame’ did its work. He was

excluded from the realm of the acceptable: geographically (he never lived in England again); socially (he was ostracised by the English abroad); financially (he remained an undischarged bankrupt at his death); and culturally (it was virtually impossible to read any of his works with anything approaching sympathy). Unmanly decadence and morbidity were policed in Wilde's case until he was silenced as a public writer of texts. The writer/text homology called him, his work and his conduct, decadent, and made it impossible for him to continue to have a public voice.

Notes

¹ The section reads: 'Any male person who, in public or in private, commits, or is party to the commission of, or procures the commission by any male person of any act of gross indecency, with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour.'

² W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1965), p. 193; also cited in Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 449.

³ Holbrook Jackson, *The 1890s* [1913] (London: The Cresset Library, 1988), p. 62.

⁴ Rupert Hart Davis (ed.), *The Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 107.

⁵ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, pp. 419-20. In his note to the letter, Hart-Davis explains that the letter did indeed appear as a sonnet, in French, written by Pierre Louÿs, in *The Spirit Lamp*, the Oxford periodical edited by Lord Alfred Douglas, on 4 May, 1893. See Hart-Davis, *Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 107.

⁶ Oscar Wilde, Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* [1891] in Merlin Holland (ed.), *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), p. 17.

⁷ Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side: Towards a Genealogy of a Discourse on Male Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 165-6.

⁸ H. Montgomery Hyde (ed.), *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (London: William Hodge and Company, Ltd, 1948), p. 331.

⁹ Quoted in Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 420.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Volume 1, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 102.

¹¹ William James had argued in *Principles of Psychology* (1890) that masculinity was bound up with several aspects of a man's life: 'A man's Self is the sum-total of what he can call his; not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and his children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank account.' All these aspects came into play during Wilde's condemnation at the trials. H. Montgomery Hyde's account of the trials shows that Wilde's extravagant writing — both public and private, his extravagant expenditure on his young male consorts, and his neglect of his wife and sons, were all taken into account in the process of finding him guilty of 'indecent'. Moreover, at each of the three court cases, the presiding judge frowned on Wilde's ability to make the people in the courtroom laugh.

¹² H. Montgomery Hyde, *Famous Trials 7: Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 113. This edition is a treatment of the trials as narrative (rather than verbatim reportage as in the 1948 edition), expanded from the earlier edition, according to Hyde, because of the greater freedom of 1962.

¹³ H. Rider Haggard, 'Introduction' to *King Solomon's Mines* [1885] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 6.

- ¹⁴ 'All art is quite useless.' From Oscar Wilde, 'Preface' to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* [1891] in Merlin Holland (ed.), *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), p. 17.
- ¹⁵ Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 151.
- ¹⁶ *Punch*, 13 March, 1880, p. 114.
- ¹⁷ Robert Hichens, *The Green Carnation* [1894] (London: Icon Books Ltd, 1961), p. 21.
- ¹⁸ Hichens, *The Green Carnation*, p. 24.
- ¹⁹ Hichens, *The Green Carnation*, p. 106.
- ²⁰ See Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 34, p. 87.
- ²¹ Throughout this chapter, references to Wilde's poems are taken from Robert Ross (ed.), *The First Collected Edition of The Works of Oscar Wilde*, Volume 6, *The Poems of Oscar Wilde* (London: Methuen and Co., 1908); references are cited parenthetically in the text by page number.
- ²² Unsigned Review in *Pall Mall Budget*, 11 June, 1894, reprinted in Karl Beckson (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 166.
- ²³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 140.
- ²⁴ Ellmann notes that *Punch* regarded the 1881 volume of *Poems* as 'Swinburne and Water.' See Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 138.
- ²⁵ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 407.
- ²⁶ Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and Victorian Public* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1987), p. 45.
- ²⁷ [W. E. Henley], Unsigned Review, 'The Sphinx up to Date,' *Pall Mall Gazette*, 9 July, 1894, p. 4; reprinted in Beckson (ed.), *The Critical Heritage*, p. 168. Unsigned Review, *Athenaeum*, 104 (25 August, 1894), p. 252, reprinted in *The Critical Heritage*, p. 170.
- ²⁸ Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England since 1830* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 37.
- ²⁹ H. Montgomery Hyde, *Famous Trials 7: Oscar Wilde*, p. 272.
- ³⁰ Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties*, pp. 95-6. Eighteen years after the event, Jackson still felt it prudent not to name Wilde's 'crime' in so many words.
- ³¹ Maureen Borland's biography of Ross, entitled *Wilde's Devoted Friend*, signals his faithfulness, during the time of his imprisonment, and even after his death. Ross was responsible, as Wilde's literary executor, for protecting his copyright, and he eventually cleared the Estate from bankruptcy, and was able to hand to Wilde's children a thriving copyright legacy. See Maureen Borland, *Wilde's Devoted Friend: A Life of Robert Ross, 1869-1918* (Oxford: Lennard Publishing, 1990).
- ³² See Richard Perceval Graves, *A. E. Housman: The Scholar Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 113; and John Stokes, *In the Nineties* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 109.
- ³³ Graves, *A. E. Housman: The Scholar Poet*, pp. 112-13.
- ³⁴ All references to Housman's poetry are taken from Christopher Ricks (ed.), *A. E. Housman, Collected Poems and Selected Prose* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), and are cited parenthetically by page number in the text.
- ³⁵ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance, Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1980), p. 188.
- ³⁶ Francis Spufford, 'Those ruthless rhymes and rotten lads' [Review of John Bayley, *Housman's Poems*] (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1992), *The Guardian*, 6 July, 1992, p. 2.
- ³⁷ Norman Page, *A. E. Housman: A Critical Biography* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1983), p. 2.
- ³⁸ Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988), p. 76.
- ³⁹ In *In the Nineties*, John Stokes notes that the 'vogue' for suicide might be associated with decadence, in that a decadent ennui is dramatised in the phrase 'tired of life', used of the suicide. See *In the Nineties*, pp. 116-119.
- ⁴⁰ Christopher Ricks, 'Introduction' to *A. E. Housman: Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, p. 7.
- ⁴¹ A. E. Housman, 'The Name and Nature of Poetry' [1933], in *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, pp. 369-70.
- ⁴² Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel' in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 34-61, p. 40.
- ⁴³ R. P. Graves notes a remark by Proust in his discussion of Housman's fascination with soldiers: 'A homosexual is not a man who loves homosexuals, but merely a man who, seeing a soldier,

immediately wants to have him for a friend.' See Graves, A. E. *Housman: The Scholar Poet*, p. 108. The soldier is at once the very type of virile masculinity; and as such, is recognised as an object of desire for same-sex identified men. For those 'in the know', 'renting' was a source of additional income amongst the lower ranks of the army, and one of the witnesses against Wilde, Charles Parker, was a soldier who was later cashiered for his part in the Wilde affair. In *A Shropshire Lad*, XXII, 'The street sounds to the soldier's tread', the poetic persona describes how, from a file passing soldiers, 'A single redcoat turns his head,/He turns and looks at me.' It is a mere moment of recognition which will never be repeated, and nothing passes between them except a single look: 'What thoughts at heart have you and I/We cannot stop to tell.' (45) This mirrors the veiled homoeroticism of Pater's 'Conclusion' to *The Renaissance*, in which he identifies 'the face of one's friend' as one of the places in which artistic experience can be sought. See Pater, ed. Hill, p. 189.

⁴⁴ See Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side*, p. 203; and H. Montgomery Hyde, *Famous Trials 7: Oscar Wilde*, pp. 202 ff. In *Love in Earnest*, Timothy D'Arch Smith glosses the word 'lad' as having a homosexual valence. See *Love in Earnest: Some Notes on the Lives and Writings of English Uranian Poets from 1889-1930* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 62.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Norman Page, A. E. *Housman: A Critical Biography*, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Rupert Hart-Davis (ed.), *More Letters of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 152-153.

⁴⁷ See Unsigned Review, *Academy*, 53 (26 February, 1898), p. 236. This review remarks that the poet's model is Hood's poem, and that Hood has produced the finer poem because 'it has more concentration, its author had more nervous strength, was a more dexterous master of words, was superior to morbidity and hysteria.' W. E. Henley's unsigned review entitled 'De Profundis' in *Outlook*, 1 (5 March, 1898), p. 146, identified Hood and Coleridge as sources; and the unsigned 'Comment' in *Pall Mall Gazette* for 4 March 1898, p. 4, mentioned the similarity to Kipling's poems. See Karl Beckson (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 211-224.

⁴⁸ Frank Harris, *Oscar Wilde* [1916] (New York: Dorset Press, 1989), p. 227.

⁴⁹ Arthur Symonds, signed review in *Saturday Review*, 85 (12 March, 1898), 365-366; reprinted in Beckson (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 218-221, p. 219.

⁵⁰ Oscar Wilde, Letter to Robert Ross, 8 October, 1897 in Rupert Hart-Davis (ed.), *Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 311.

⁵¹ Oscar Wilde, 'Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Very Young', [*Chameleon*, December, 1894] in Merlin Holland (ed.), *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), p. 1244.

⁵² Arthur Symonds, signed review in *Saturday Review*, 85 (12 March, 1898), 365-366; reprinted in Beckson (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 218-221, p. 219.

⁵³ Merlin Holland describes his grandfather's life as having 'all the elements of Greek theatre ...: the hero apparently in control of his destiny; the hubris; the tragic flaw; and finally the nemesis.' See Introduction to *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, p.2. And Wilde saw himself as a Christian hero — or indeed a Christlike figure — in his prison letter, *De Profundis*, he compares himself to a Christ of his own imagination: 'He is just like a work of art himself. He does not really teach one anything, but by being brought into his presence one become something.' See Hart-Davis (ed.), *Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 215.

⁵⁴ Bevis Hillier, 'New Found Papers throw a Light on Two Literary Giants', *The Times* (17 June, 1968), p. 8.

⁵⁵ James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 189.

⁵⁶ Unsigned Review, *Academy*, 53 (26 February, 1898), 235; reprinted in Beckson (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, p. 212.

⁵⁷ Yeats wrote in the introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*: 'I plucked out even famous lines because, effective in themselves, put into *The Ballad* they become artificial, trivial, arbitrary: a work of art can have but one subject.' Quoted in John Stokes, *In the Nineties*, p. 109.

⁵⁸ Oscar Wilde, Letter to Robert Ross, 1 October, 1897, in Hart-Davis (ed.), *Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 310.

⁵⁹ Review signed S. G., 'Literary Notes', *Pall Mall Gazette* (19 March, 1898), p. 4; reprinted in Beckson (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 221-222.

⁶⁰ W. E. Henley's review, for example, 'De Profundis', which appeared in *Outlook*, 1 (5 March, 1898), p. 146 is very much a personal attack on Wilde (there was no love lost between the two men). And

although Henley refers to the poet throughout as C.3.3., never naming Wilde, his catalogue of criticisms are *ad hominem*. His last sentence speaks of the poet needing to 'make his name honoured among men', implying its current status as dishonoured name. See Beckson (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 214-216.

⁶¹ George Orwell, 'Inside the Whale' in *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), p. 23.



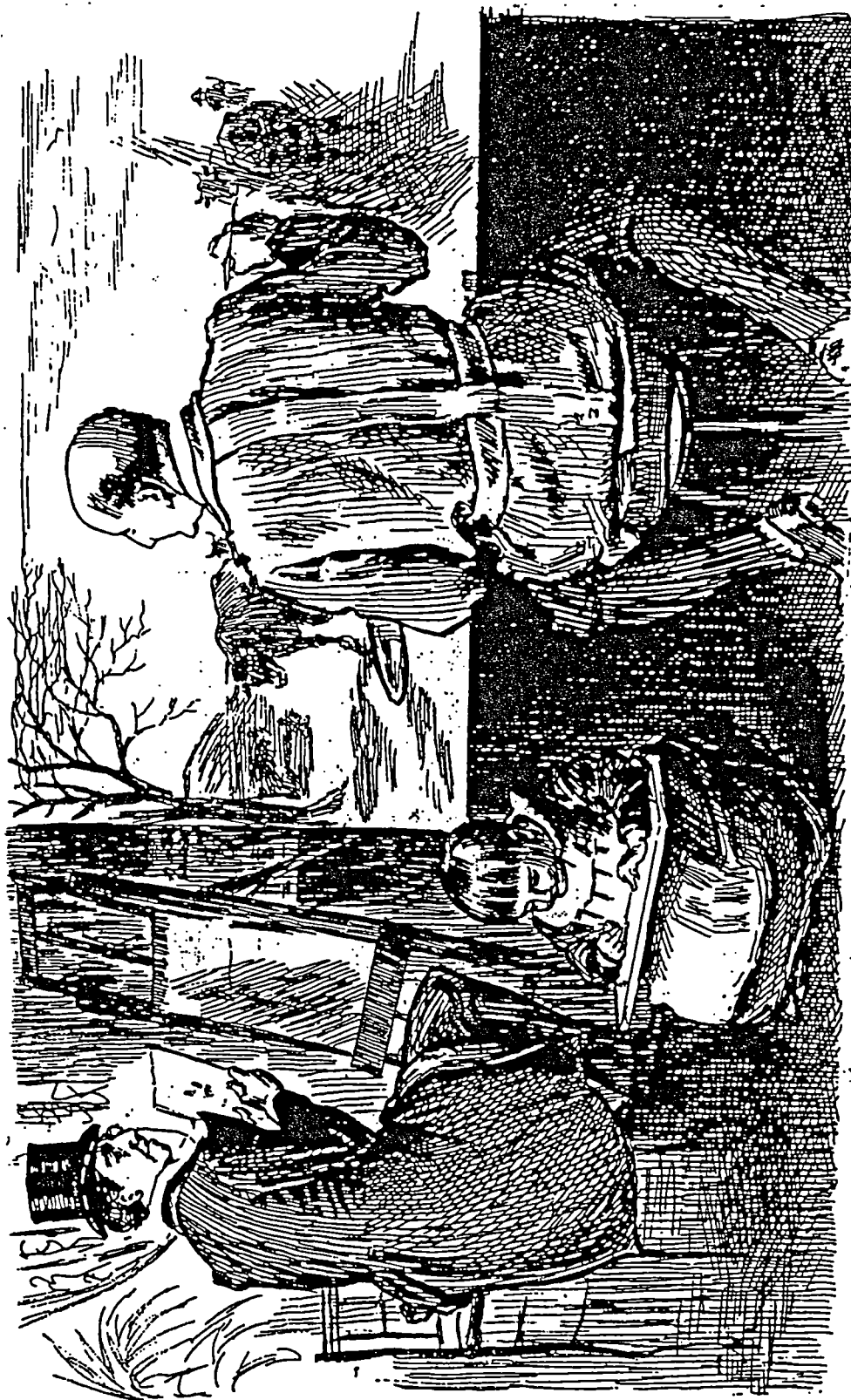
THE STERNER SEX!

"HELLO, GERTY! YOU'VE GOT FRED'S HAT ON, AND HIS COVER COAT!"

"YES. DON'T YOU LIKE IT?"

"WELL—IT MAKES YOU LOOK LIKE A YOUNG MAN, YOU KNOW, AND THAT'S SO EFFEMINATE!"

Figure 1: 'The Sterner Sex', *Punch*, 26 November, 1891



OUR DECADENTS.

Flipbull (the famous young Art-Critic). "ULLO! WHAT'S THIS PENCIL SKETCH I'VE JUST FOUND ON THIS EASEL!"
Our Artist. "OH, IT'S BY FLUMPKIN—THE IMPRESSIONIST FELLOW ALL YOU YOUNG CHAPS ARE SO ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT, YOU KNOW. CLEVER, AIN'T IT?"

Flipbull. "CLEVER! WHY, IT'S DIVINE! SUCH FRESHNESS, SUCH NAÏVETÉ! SUCH A SPLENDID SCORN OF MERE CONVENTIONAL TECHNIQUE! SUCH A——"

Our Artist. "ULLO, OLD MAN! A THOUSAND PARDONS! THAT'S THE WRONG THING YOU'VE GOT HOLD OF! THAT'S JUST A SCRIBBLE BY THIS LITTLE SCAMP OF A GRANDSON OF MINE. HIS FIRST ATTEMPT! NOT VERY PROMISING, I FEAR; BUT HE'S ONLY FOUR!"

Figure 2: 'Our Decadents', *Punch*, 7 July, 1894

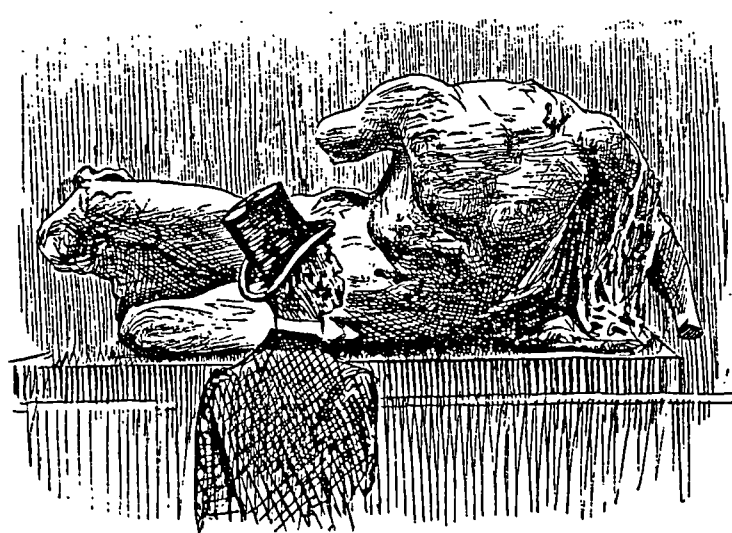


DISTINGUISHED AMATEURS.—2. THE ART-CRITIC.

Prigsby contemplating his friend Maudli's last Picture. "THE HEAD OF ALEXIS IS DISTINCTLY DIVINE! NOR CAN I, IN THE WHOLE RANGE OF ANCIENT, MEDIEVAL, OR MODERN ART, RECALL ANYTHING QUITE SO FAIR AND PRECIOUS; UNLESS IT BE, PERHAPS, THE HEAD OF THAT SUPREME MASTERPIECE OF GREEK SCULPTURE, THE ILYSSUS, WHEREOF INDEED, IN A CERTAIN GRACIOUS MODELING OF THE LOVELY NECK, AND IN THE SUBTLY DELECTABLE CURVES OF THE CHEEK AND CHIN, IT FAINTLY, YET MOST EXQUISITELY, REMINDS ME!"

Chorus of Fair Enthusiasts (who still believe in Prigsby). "OH, YES—YES!—OF COURSE!—THE ILYSSUS!!—IN THE ELGIN MARBLES, YOU KNOW!!! HOW TRUE!!!!"

ALWAYS READY TO LEARN, AND DEEPLY IMPRESSED BY THE EXTENT OF PRIGSBY'S INFORMATION, OUR GALLANT FRIEND THE COLONEL TAKES AN EARLY OPPORTUNITY OF VISITING THE BRITISH MUSEUM, IN ORDER TO STUDY THE HEAD AND NECK OF



THE ILYSSUS!

Figure 7: 'Distinguished Amateurs — 2: The Art Critic'
Punch, 13 March, 1880



Figure 3.: 'Our Decadents', *Punch*, 27 October, 1894



Figure 4:
Edward Burne-Jones,
Pygmalion and the Image
(1878), nos 1-3

1. 'The Heart Desires'
2. 'The Hand Refrains'
3. 'The Godhead Fires'



Overleaf: Figure 5
Edward Burne-Jones,
Pygmalion and the Image
(1878),
no. 4: 'The Soul Attains'

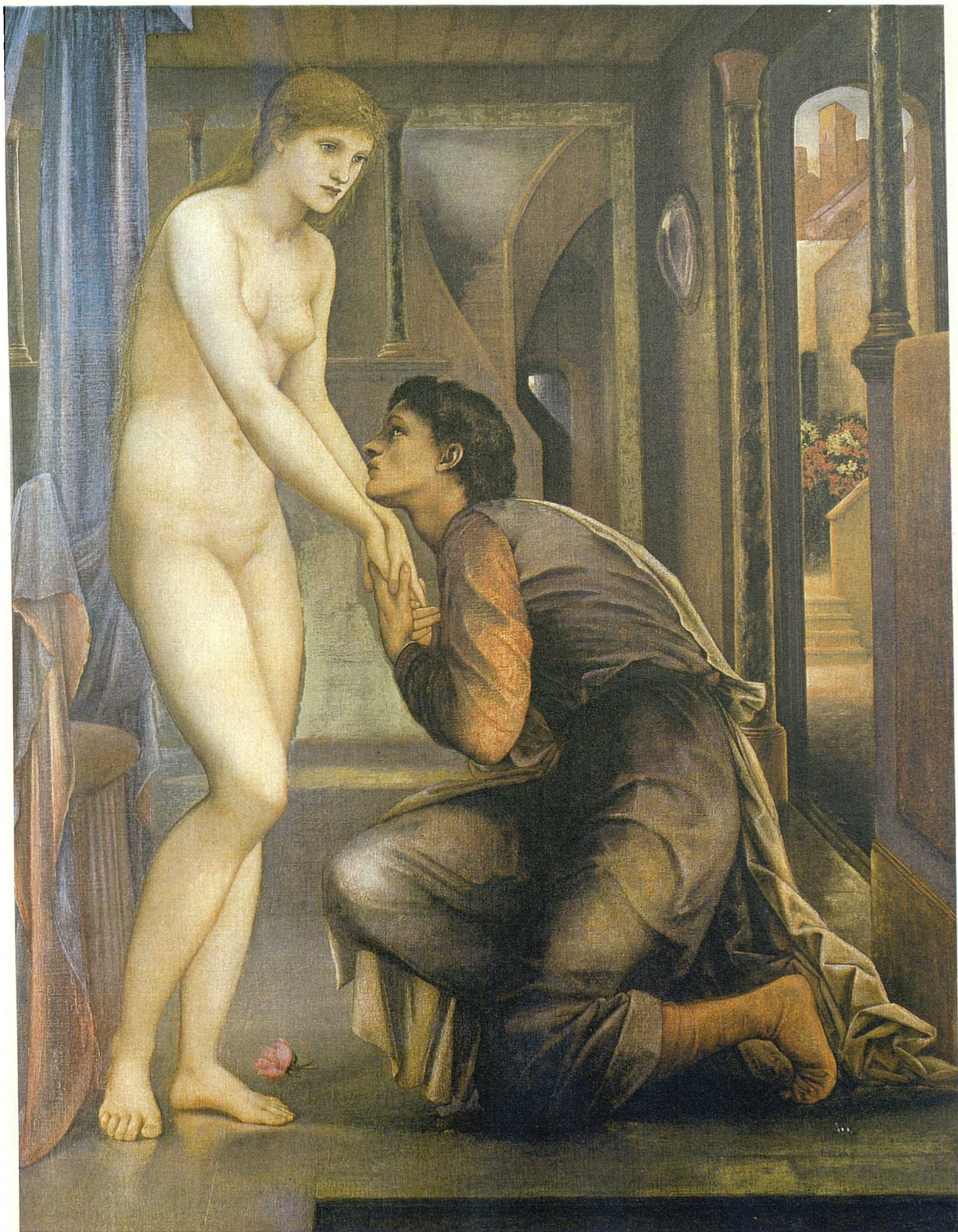




Figure 6: Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 'The Sculptor's Model' (1878)

Chapter Five: Arthur Symons: The Decadent Critic as Artist

The influence of Arthur Symons on the generation of writers who followed his nineties' experimentation with discourses of decadence was immense. His book, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) was dedicated to W. B. Yeats, and read with careful attention by T. S. Eliot; and partly on the strength of this book, it is a commonplace of discussions of his work to say that he was the chronicler of decadence, and the herald of the modernist aesthetic.¹ That modernism eventually took a different route from that suggested by Symons's thorough-going symbolism led to his work being nearly ignored for almost half a century, until Frank Kermode began the process of re-assessing his work in his 1957 book *Romantic Image*. Yeats and Eliot, on whom his influence was very great, both moved away from the symbolism to which he had introduced them and took their work in other directions. Eliot, indeed, used what he saw as Symons's impressionistic criticism as an Aunt Sally to be knocked down when he was formulating his own views on the function of criticism in his 1920 essay, 'The Perfect Critic', in which he argued that impressionism is limited as a critical tool because it is definitively a subjective mode: 'We can please ourselves with our own impressions of the characters and their emotions; and we do not find the impressions of another person, however sensitive, very significant', he says.²

Eliot's argument against impressionism concentrates on just one half of Symons's own critical standpoint on the issue of decadence, which Symons divided in his 1893 *Harper's* article, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', into impressionism — the concentration on the senses or on the body — and symbolism — where the emphasis is on the soul. Ian Fletcher has argued that Eliot's assessment of Symons's critical importance is misleading, because he refuses to acknowledge the extent to which Symons's development of the idea of Symbolism influenced Eliot himself. Fletcher concludes that as both critic and poet, Eliot was essentially 'Symbolist', and that

therefore, Symons was a formative influence on his thought.³ Eliot's resistance to the location of art's effects in the body is at the root of his attack on Symons's impressionism; he values 'thought' over 'feeling' in the critical mind.⁴ As such, his resistance to Symons's influence is a resistance to 'decadence', in that in Symons's oeuvre, decadence and the body — the five senses and a thorough-going sensuality — go together.

Symons's concentration on the body is the result of his creative misreading of the works of Pater, whose influence on his work is undisputed. Although Pater's *Renaissance* and his 'novel' *Marius the Epicurean* are both attempts to recall the reader to an appreciation of the physical world, Pater was also anxious to avoid the charge of hedonism. His recovery of the word 'ascesis' invoked a discipline of both mind and body; thus although all sensations — be they mental or physical — are to be seen as transient and localised, the disciplined mind, through its training in asceticism, could relive its various moments of heightened sensitivity, and recuperate the passing moment. In the 'Conclusion' to the *Renaissance*, Pater had insisted that success in life depended on a continually heightened state of awareness in both mind and body, which expanded the interval of life and resisted the closure of death:

our one chance is in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. High passions give one this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, political or religious enthusiasm, or the 'enthusiasm of humanity.' Only be sure it is passion, that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art's sake, has most; for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake.⁵

Pater placed mind and body together as equal partners in the aesthetic equation. If he lived up to his ideal himself, it was in part because he created the circumstances of his life to enable him to withdraw from the pressing needs of everyday reality. Symons, writing his 'obituary' notice of Pater in 1896 described Pater's ideal personality as 'a personality withdrawn from action, which it despises or dreads, solitary with its ideals.' And he described Pater himself as a man who deliberately set out to live his life as art, with art's implicit stasis and serenity: 'He did not permit life to come to him

without a certain ceremony; he was on his guard against the abrupt discretion of events; and if his whole life was a service of art, he arranged his life so that, as far as possible, it might be serviced by that dedication.’⁶

Pater’s own life, however, was a relatively private life, whether he was in Oxford or in London. Those who read his work but lived at the heart of the city had little choice but to adapt his ideals to their own material circumstances. As John Lucas has argued, writers like Symons might have derived their ‘cadences’ from Pater, but they located their aesthetic in the ‘echoing city streets’, where, although the artist is an isolated figure, he is also a member of the crowd.⁷ The figures who populate Yeats’s ‘Tragic Generation’ for example, writers such as Dowson and Johnson, sought their pleasures through the stimulus of alcohol, and in Dowson’s case, through an idealistic attachment to an unattainable young girl. Yeats asks of these figures why, despite their high ideals derived from Pater, they lived ‘lives of such disorder.’ Was it the fault of the age in which they lived? Or did they but ‘pursue antithesis?’⁸ Yeats provides no answer, but it is clear that the demands and temptations of modern city life were partly responsible for the flourishing neuroses of those who could not impose an artistic distance between themselves and sordidness of the rest of life. The experience of the city is fragmented, a series of isolated impressions which the artist is not necessarily able to connect into a vision of Arnoldian stability. Pater’s model of seeing the world as a series of isolated impressions was attractive to those who lived in conditions where Arnold’s ideal seemed so impossible. In ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’, Symons sees the Goncourts as urban artists who see the world aesthetically — through opera glasses. But the vision they see ‘has always been somewhat feverish with the diseased sharpness of over-excited nerves’. The Goncourts ‘have never sought “to see life steadily and see it whole”.’⁹ For this, they are to be admired, not attacked.

When Pater’s impressionism is transplanted to the city it becomes potentially dangerous, for in the city, it is difficult to anchor a sense of self; unremitting contact with the crowd provides physical rather than mental stimulus, and is at odds with Pater’s ideal of asceticism. In his book, *London: A Book of Aspects* (first published in

1908), Symons wrote that 'London was for a long time my supreme sensation, and to roam in the streets, especially after the lamps were lit, my chief pleasure. I had no motive in it, merely the desire to get out of doors, and to be among people, lights, to get out of myself.'¹⁰ The escape from the self is a form of ecstasy which is also a cutting adrift from the stable composite personality who is in a position to see life steadily and whole; it is not the path of asceticism, which requires self-discipline alongside self-consciousness. The seeker after heightened stimulation in the city is liberated to seek stimulation in dangerous places: in alcohol, hashish, absinthe and in sexual encounters. The emphasis in the city is on physical sensation rather than on the mind.

At the same time, for the poet there is an obligation to order that which is disordered into aesthetic patterns. At the heart of Symons's aesthetic is a dialectic located in the opposition between body and mind, between sense impressions and the poet's need to aestheticise or idealise the sense impressions into art — between life and art. The role of the decadent artist is not, however, to resolve the dialectic into stasis. Rather, beauty is located in the liminal space between the certainties of binary opposition. For this reason, Symons habitually chose, in both his poetry and his fiction, to dwell on subject matter and moods which were, to say the least, ambiguous. The titles of his first three volumes of poetry, *Days and Nights* (1889), *Silhouettes* (1892) and *London Nights* (1895), all imply a commitment to *obscurity* and ambiguity, not to sweetness and *light*. His preferred time of day is evening (when the gas lamps provide uncertain and artificial light); his preferred landscape is the city streets and public places; or else he moves into the intensely private space of the bedroom rendered ambivalently public through the writing of poetry which opens the door on explicit sexual encounters which should more properly be hidden.¹¹ His poetic persona stands on the threshold, looking both outwards and inwards, and enjoying the performative tensions implicit in such a position, crossing and re-crossing the line which marks, in Foucault's terms, the boundaries of transgression.

The chosen geography of the city — usually London — is a choice highly determined for Symons in terms of both class and gender. The city through which his

poetic and journalistic personae travel is a borderland space: not the city of the seat of government or of commerce, nor the city of the establishment view of culture (art galleries and museums). Those places are most significant in their conventional guises during the day. Symons's creative work, however, inhabits spaces which are most alive at night. He chooses as his subject matter the cafés and hotels, the theatres and music-halls, and thereby marks himself out as a liminal inhabitant of the city. As several commentators have noted, the nineteenth-century use of urban space was carefully policed according to cultural and moral values associated with class and gender. Françoise Barret-Ducroq suggests that

London high society ... would walk, or ride or drive in Hyde Park, Rotten Row or the Mall. This use of urban space was subject to strictly defined rules governing times of day, seasons, escorts and so forth. Outside these few times and places, respectable citizens used the streets only for getting to work, to the park, to church or ... for shopping. Anyone loitering in the street, especially in the evening was liable to be taken for a debauchee in quest of amorous adventures.

Not to be in a hurry in the city — particularly for working-class women — came to be perceived as an index of 'doubtful morality'; for the working-class woman, 'loitering on the street, hanging about for too long without any obvious errand was seen as unnatural, since female activity was firmly centred on the world of the interior, indoors. ... Suspicion was aroused by nothing more than a dawdling gait and the absence of any obvious errand.'¹² And Judith Walkowitz shows how the 'right to the city' was a bourgeois male pleasure, which permitted a privileged male gaze on the goings-on in the city streets.¹³ Such a gaze was privileged precisely because the figures who were observed by the bourgeois male were themselves seldom male or middle class.

Symons's personae adopt the role of the *flâneur*, a man with no particular place to go, with the wealth and liberty to stroll through the city streets at any time of day, and to observe the world he encounters there. For Symons himself, the role was a fiction; he had no private income and did not make sufficient sums by his pen to purchase the liberty celebrated by his poetry. He chose the role, however, as a kind of contemporary urban version of Pater's ideal of a life 'more given to contemplation than to action.'¹⁴ The *flâneur* can take his time and look at the world around him; he need not

do anything very much, since the pleasure of looking is quite sufficient, satisfying the decadent paradox of placing the viewer at the centre of events whilst simultaneously maintaining an aesthetic perspective on them. His *flâneur* figure is also a figure of nostalgia, whose day is passing, since in the modern city, no-one walks any more: 'The verbs to loll, to lounge, to dawdle, to loiter ... are losing their currency,' he complains in *London: A Book of Aspects*; 'they will be marked "o" for obsolete in the dictionaries of the future.'¹⁵ His favourite places are the foreign quarters leading out from Leicester Square, and his favourite street was one Holywell Street, demolished in 1902; its loss is a source of regret because it was such a romantic place which exists now only in the memories of those who enjoyed

its surreptitious shop windows, the windows always dusty, through which one dimly saw English translations of Zola among chemists' paraphernalia. The street had a bad reputation, and by night, doors opened and shut unexpectedly up dark passages. Perhaps that vague dubiousness added a little to its charms.¹⁶

To go to Holywell Street, to linger in its 'vague dubiousness', is to add to one's own aura of the exotic; the man who lingers there is a man who cares nothing for its 'bad reputation'.

This street is emblem of Symons's attitude to the city, and it dramatises his decadent position within it. It had stood between the Temple and Piccadilly,¹⁷ representing in turn law in the city, and the speed of city business and city pleasures. Symons suggests that to have known Holywell Street is to have known the 'real' London. But in these terms the 'real' London is a definitively liminal space — a place between two legitimate worlds of business and law, and now, a space which no longer exists. Alongside the decadent pleasure of the marginal border space, there is the added *frisson* of a decadent nostalgia for an unrecoverable past. Moreover, even when the street still stood, it was scarcely 'real.' Symons describes it as having a Medieval air, with overhanging wooden-fronted houses, similar to those of Coventry (also no longer extant), reaching back to an even more distant past. One saw it only 'dimly'; the windows were 'surreptitious' and always 'dusty' — so that memory recreates both geography and history in the manner of an Impressionist painting. It was a street with a

bad reputation at night, though the nature of that reputation is left indefinite, to the imagination of the reader. But even during the day it was a street full of temptations:

the bookshops! ... Those dingy shops with their stalls open to the street nearly all on the right, how seldom did I keep my resolution to walk past them with unaverted eyes, how rarely did I resist their temptations. Half the books I possess were bought second-hand in Holywell Street, and what bargains I have made out of the fourpenny books. On the hottest days there was shade there, and excuse for lounging. It was a paradise for the book-lover.¹⁸

The example of literature which he produces, dimly seen 'English translations of Zola', implies that the nature of the temptation would be constructed as immoral by the respectable citizen, since Zola's works had been banned in the 1880s, and his English publisher, George Vizetelly, had been prosecuted and imprisoned for obscenity.¹⁹ The very naming of 'temptation' in this context, alongside the pleasure taken in the shop-window displays, and the need for 'resolution' to resist their 'charms', suggests further that some kind of eroticism is at play — even if, in this case, the fetishised object is 'only' a book. (Symons deliberately does not say that the book in question has been defined as pornographic.) Finally, then, the street is both literally and metaphorically a shady place. It encourages 'lounging' on hot summer days because it is cool in contrast to the heat of the rest of the city. But lounging is itself an index of moral failure — a giving-in to temptation. Holywell Street might have been a form of 'paradise', but this is no orthodox heaven.

The themes which Symons takes up and develops in his fiction and poetry are themes of pleasurable (but illicit) nostalgia, of the enjoyment of stolen leisure, of going against the grain of respectable, productive, worldly,²⁰ middle-class masculinity. London is aestheticised; it is not a place of business, but an impressionist painting which 'one sees in passing, in hardly more than a series of flashes.' It is 'a pantomime and a masquerade.'²¹ It is an illusory space of invented pleasures, where London's reality is recreated in the mind's eye as beautiful, an act of re-creation (and recreation) which is analogous to the creativity of the artist. G. Robert Stange has commented that Symons was the first English writer to give the 'scattered facts of the city a metaphoric

significance'. He wrote of London with 'something like Baudelaire's mythographic sense, [making] the city a convincing milieu of spiritual adventures.'²²

Symons's practice, however, is not apolitical, and the adventures are not all spiritual; his writing has a radically subversive potential since the sites in the city of which he chooses to write are radically 'other'. They are geographically at the centre, but they are culturally marginal. When Symons does choose to write about the city's culturally central places — like Trafalgar Square, with its several signs of nationhood (the *national* hero, Nelson, and the *National* Gallery) — he does so in order to undermine the very centrality which he has also invoked. Trafalgar Square is viewed at night, in the rain. A teeming public space by day is deserted by night, its meanings appropriated to the cause of decadence. In the eerie light of the gas-lamps, the pretensions of the great gallery become paper thin, 'like a frontispiece' — all facade and no substance. And the monument to national heroism is feebly lit, so that only the base is visible, surrounded by its 'sulky lions'.²³ For Symons's persona, these observations are 'mere pleasure, ... a pleasure which quickened into an actual excitement' as the monuments of nationhood give the impression of impermanence, owing to accidental atmospheric conditions. London is resolutely not, in this construction of it, a place to be seen steadily and whole.

It is in marginal spaces, with their marginal inhabitants that Symons found his subject matter, and in which his decadence resides. Placing himself in the margins, he faced two ways; towards the respectable and towards the dubious. His definition of decadence depends on this positioning, which enables the word to be 'hurled as a reproach or hurled back as a defiance'.²⁴ The conventions of respectable society must be invoked if they are to be flouted. Dominant heterosexual models of sexuality in which the male is an aggressive predator, the female a passive victim, and in which married sex is the only respectable option, are at once invoked and subverted through the process of rendering their assumptions open to interrogation. Although the decadent is unlikely to bring about revolution in the streets, his attitude opens up

fissures in social assumptions, taking away the safety of social and sexual attitudes as confident 'givens'.

It would certainly be a mistake to see Symons as having an uncomplicatedly positive attitude towards women. Indeed, much of his work depends on his aligning himself with forces of masculine culture which were explicitly hostile to the claims of women. As editor of *The Savoy*, for example, he collaborated in a project which Laurel Brake has described as an aggressively heterosexist and masculist publication: '*The Savoy* is full of male discourse, masculine constructions of women, and misogyny, bristling (if that is the word) with erotic drawings, and clearly (and exclusively) aimed at male readers.'²⁵ But Symons, even if he did align himself with the concerns of patriarchal culture, and appeared in *The Savoy* to be seeking to conserve dominant cultural models of the relationships between the sexes, is not a simple misogynist either. *The Savoy* in its overstatement of masculine values, also implies the weakness of those values: an ideological position which is utterly accepted by a society does not need to be stated; and Symons and Beardsley's collaboration on the magazine implies that the naturalness of their masculist position was not a 'given'. Moreover, even though *The Savoy* has a misogynist edge, Symons's work as a whole does not. In his poetry and his short stories, he does not merely repeat the old platitudes about the relative positions of men and women. Rather, he opens up a fissure in the sexuality debates by at once stating and subverting conventional attitudes: it is in the arena of sexual politics — and Symons's deliberate placing of his personae at the margins of the debate — that his decadence is most evident. And in this arena, decadence becomes a force of creative indeterminacy, not a space for the enforcement of conventional, rigid definitions of sex roles.

Spiritual Adventures: Symons's Decadent Short Fiction

... in the 'motley' Strand, among these hurrying people, under the smoky sky, I could walk and yet watch. If there was ever a religion of the eyes, I have devoutly practised that religion. I noted every face that passed me on the pavement; I looked into the omnibuses, the cabs, always with the same eager hope of seeing some beautiful or interesting person, some gracious movement, a delicate expression, which would be gone if I did not catch it as it went. This

search without aim grew to be almost a torture to me; my eyes ached with the effort, but I could not control them. At every moment, I knew, some spectacle awaited them; I grasped at all these sights with the same futile energy as a dog that I once saw standing in an Irish stream, and snapping at the bubbles that ran continually past him on the water. Life ran past me continually, and I tried to make all its bubbles my own.²⁶

Because Symons's poetry is based in an impressionist aesthetic, it is sometimes difficult to follow through the philosophy of his position by reading his poems. In the collection of short stories which he published in 1905, *Spiritual Adventures*, his ideas are developed at greater length, and they permit the reader to analyse in more detail what Symons may have meant by decadence. The above quotation comes from the first story in the collection, 'A Prelude to Life,' considered by Karl Beckson to be sufficiently autobiographical to be included in his edition of *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons*,²⁷ but conceived of by Symons himself as a story. The first-person narrator of the story shares many of Symons's own preoccupations and experiences — particularly in as much as both author and character lived their early lives moving from one place to another, and both have a religious family background.²⁸ But it is not quite Symons who is speaking here: rather it is a fictionalised version of himself, made more romantic, more severe, and more precocious.

Like the Arthur Symons who wrote of his fascination with London in *A Book of Aspects*, the narrator of this story is deeply impressed by what he sees in the city — a seeing which is fascinating and addictive. The attractions of the city are dangerously illusory, and it is the mixture of illusory pleasure and real pain which informs the whole of *Spiritual Adventures*. Symons himself called the collection his 'imaginary portraits',²⁹ drawing on Pater's title for his collection of short fiction published in volume form in 1887, suggesting that Symons's stories were intended as urban and contemporary versions of Pater's fables of a mythological and pastoral past. For the narrator of 'A Prelude to Life', the attractions of the city are a quasi-religious experience; and the dangers of the city come from his inability to control his pleasure in 'looking', a failure of asceticism in which the sensual takes over from the spiritual.

In all the stories of *Spiritual Adventures*, the main characters occupy the narrowest of borderline positions, standing between aesthetic pleasure and tragedy in their real lives. All discover, in their various ways, that the decadent moment is unsustainable. The attempt to 'maintain the ecstasy' leads to madness, spiritual emptiness or death — the complete loss of self implied by the very word 'ecstasy'. As Jan B. Gordon has noted, these stories of the collapse of the artistic mind are prophetic of Symons's own mental collapse; three years after their publication, Symons himself had a massive mental breakdown from which he never fully recovered. The characters he writes about here share, with the literary personalities of Yeats's 'Tragic Generation', the fates of those who live in an age of contradictions and who eagerly pursue antithesis.³⁰

The 'I' persona of 'A Prelude to Life' sets the tone for the whole volume. He is a man who looks on life, rather than participating in it fully: he is a voyeur and a *flâneur*. He is also a writer whose observations (even those of himself) become the subjects of his fiction. This narrator is particularly suited to the observation of marginal characters in that he shares their marginality. He describes himself as a man without stable origins, and is at a loss to explain 'how the queer child I was laid the foundation of the man I became' (3). His problem has continually been one of dislocation, an inability to settle, founded on the peripatetic existence of his early life:

If I have been a vagabond, and I have never been able to root myself in any one place, it is because I have no early memories of any one sky or soil. It has freed me from many prejudices in giving me its own unresting kind of freedom; but it has cut me off from whatever is stable, of long growth in the world. (4)³¹

Whilst then, he makes his life's work out of seeing the world and its pains and pleasures, he does so at a distance; but the distance between the man who sees and the people he observes is without the security of a constant, stable perspective. His unconnectedness is both his strength and his weakness, and characterises the position of the decadent: 'I existed, others also existed; but between us there was an impassable gulf and I had rarely any desire to cross it' (31).

The narrator cannot (and does not wish to) achieve the Arnoldian ideal of seeing life steadily and whole. He merely snatches at impressions. The partial pictures which he creates of the world are predicated on his own character, as a man whose physical and spiritual needs are constantly in conflict with each other. This is in part the result of his religious upbringing, partly the effect of something intrinsic to his own nature.

I was ignorant of my own body; I looked upon the relationship of a man and a woman as something essentially wicked; my imagination took fire, but I was hardly conscious of any physical reality connected with it. ... I had a feeling of deepest reverence for women, from which I endeavoured to banish the slightest consciousness of sex. ... At the same time, I had a guilty delight in reading books which told me about the sensations of physical love, and I trembled with ecstasy as I read them. Thoughts of them haunted me; I put them out of my head by an effort, I called them back, they ended by never leaving me. (36-7)

He accesses the world of physical sensation through his deliberate exposure of himself to literature; but the attractions of sex are not connected to 'any physical reality' because of his neo-Victorian 'reverence for women' in which sex is forbidden. He occupies, that is, the space between the physical and the imaginative, and is split by the sense that these oppositions are irreconcilable.³² This is a decadent split. And as a narrator, he is drawn to characters who share his sense of internal opposition, though in the other characters, the problems are articulated and dramatised in other ways. Obsession and addiction are the main themes of the stories, and these aspects have their attractions and their penalties. The message of the stories is that no resolution is possible, that the decadent moment of contradictory impulses can neither be sustained nor avoided. The attempt to resolve the 'split' through a return to conventional morality is figured as a defeat; the refusal of the decadent position of liminality renders the mind 'quiescent ... conventional' (294).

All the figures in the stories are outsiders. Esther Kahn is both working class and Jewish, as well as being a woman: her chosen art is the art of the actress with all its implications of a certain *louche* (though nonetheless attractive) unrespectability.³³ Of the other characters, Christian Trevalga is a pianist of genius, born in Cornwall of degenerate stock. The sensitivity to sound which makes so fine a musician eventually drives him mad. Lucy Newcome is marginalised by her position as a child in an adult

world whose meanings she cannot understand. Peter Waydelin is a painter who experiments with the decadent proposition that life and art are intrinsically connected. He tests the limits of that proposition by marrying the chorus girl who is also his model or muse, with predictably tragic consequences. Daniel Roserra in 'An Autumn City' marries, like Peter Waydelin, for artistic reasons only to discover that he too has made a horrible mistake because he has forgotten the reality and humanity of the intimacy of marriage in his enthusiasm for his aesthetic dream. Seaward Lackland finds his tragedy in a total religious commitment, his story making an implicit connection (through its context in this collection) between decadent art and religious belief. His very name expresses his lack of rootedness to the solid ground of ordinary experience. And finally, Henry Luxulyan is a scholar, chasing an arcane and unlikely subject (Attila the Hun), who is forced through his relationship with a fantastically deformed woman to try to resolve the contradiction between aesthetics and life. Like all the other characters, his attempt is a failure, and he dies because of the split between his idealisation of woman as category and the grotesque specificity of the one woman who loves him.

These narratives are all implicitly predicated on a gendered conception of the meaning of the self in general, and the artistic self in particular. In all cases the self is a matter of artifice and construction rather than of 'human nature'. The stories depend on the careful observation of the self-conscious making of the self, which means different things to male and female protagonists. The implication is that whilst women have no essential selves — they are all artifice and construction — men, on the other hand, lose touch with their essence when they allow themselves to become obsessed by artifice or appearance in themselves and others. They are all observers of the world around them; but they are also, like the narrator of 'A Prelude to Life', observers of themselves which leads them into the 'intense self-consciousness, ... [the] over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement, [the] spiritual and moral perversity' which, for Symons, characterises decadence. They can only fix themselves fleetingly; and they are narrated by a 'disembodied voice' (it may or may not be the same as the voice which narrates the first story) which seeks to tell of the tragedies of their 'human soul[s]'.³⁴

The gendered implications of the decadent dilemma are seen most clearly in three of the eight stories which make up *Spiritual Adventures*, 'Esther Kahn,' 'The Death of Peter Waydelin,' and 'Extracts from the Journal of Henry Luxulyan.' In the case of Esther Kahn, like the narrator of 'A Prelude to Life', Esther observes the world around her with little sense of a personal involvement in it. She 'cared only to look on; nothing mattered to her; ... [her family was] what she supposed real life was, and that was a thing in which she had only a disinterested curiosity' (60). She is incapable of an internal life and focuses only on what people *do* as the index of who they are and what they feel. For her, the external is the only index of the possible existence of an inner self. Like the narrator of the first story, she sees her body — and the bodies of others — as intrinsically separate from the spirit or mind. For her, this is all the more dangerous since she is inarticulate and 'never quite interpreted' the words of others because 'they seemed to have a secret meaning of their own' which she cannot read as she can read gestures. (58). In the course of her own story, she is virtually without a voice; she scarcely speaks at all, and even her roles on the stage are reported rather than directly dramatised. Her consciousness, such as it is, is represented therefore as dependent on the gestures which she imitates from others without fully understanding them. She is a talented actress, the story implies, because she is a talented observer and mimic of gesture, not because she is self-expressive: there seems to be no self to express. And consequently she is disconnected from the world around her.

Her story really begins at the point at which she is provoked into the quest to discover a self. An old Jewish actor advises her that if she seeks to become an actress of genius, she must fall in love, because until she has experienced real pain she will have no internal life to transform into art. Esther sets out on this quest as if it is a scientific experiment. Her chosen lover is a playwright named Philip Haygarth, who teaches her how to improve her acting technique. His pedagogy emphasises Esther's internal emptiness, as she learns by rote, like a child:

with her, the understanding came with the power of expression, sometimes really seeming to proceed from the sound to the sense, from the gesture inward. ... Her mind worked, but it worked under suggestion, as hypnotists say; the idea had to come to her through instinct, or it would never come. (78)

She is, that is, an empty vessel, filled from the outside with knowledge, possessing nothing of her own internally. In this she resembles other *fin-de-siècle* representations of women on the stage — almost the only artistic role which can be imagined for a woman — particularly in her reliance on masculine intervention to teach her the true path to her art. Like Trilby, the eponymous heroine of George du Maurier's 1894 novel, her talent can only be identified and released by a man; like Trilby, Esther's talent is based on her body not her mind;³⁵ and throughout the process, Esther, like Trilby, remains virtually unconscious of her achievement. Moreover, like Svengali, there is something faintly sinister in Haygarth's ability to control and form his subject. Esther's story also resembles that of Sybil Vane in Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, as Jan B. Gordon has noted.³⁶ But there is an absolute difference between these two conceptions of the tragic or decadent actress. Sybil's tragedy is that she is no longer able to act at all when love touches her life: contact with real emotion destroys her ability to represent it. With Esther, love completes her art, though there is a great cost attached to it.

As Haygarth teaches her, Esther gradually falls in love with him and becomes increasingly demanding and jealous. The playwright, however, resists committing himself to her because his interest in their affair is very different from hers. He sees her, as Dorian sees Sybil, only in terms of her art.

The actress interested Haygarth greatly, but the actress interested him as a problem, as something quite apart from his feelings as a man, a lover. ... [N]othing she could do as an artist made the least difference to his feeling about her as a woman; his pride in her was like his pride in a play that he had written finely, and put aside; to be glanced at from time to time, with cool satisfaction. (81-2)

When Haygarth asserts his independence from Esther and takes another mistress, the pain she feels at his rejection makes her a triumph in one of his plays, in which 'she had to die, after the manner of the Lady of Camellias [*sic*], waiting for the lover who, in this case, never came' (86). Her aesthetic triumph makes her irresistible to Haygarth, whilst she simultaneously becomes indifferent to him. The tragedy of her life is that her

genius in representing emotion exhausts the emotion itself. Having once had an intense feeling — and knowing henceforth how to represent that feeling through gesture — her future as an actress is secure: 'she knew that she could repeat the note, whenever she wished, now that she had once found it' (87). But the act of representation empties the emotion of its meaning, so that the stable perfection of art is achieved at the expense of true feeling in life. Esther ends her story 'weeping uncontrollable tears' at her sense of loss. And in this, her story reverses the trajectory of Sybil Vane's whose art is destroyed by real-life emotion, whereas Esther proves her worth as an actress through loving and losing. The price of discovering her artistic genius is the re-enforcement of her loss of her self. Her end is a death-in-life from which there is no escape. In becoming the perfect symbol of suffering on the stage, she cannot escape the stasis of art, of living only as a symbol with no real life of her own. This is a decadent tragedy of a particularly feminine kind, since Esther, like Sybil (though unlike Dorian), has no other sphere of action beyond the sphere of artistic representation which makes up her whole existence.

The final story in *Spiritual Adventures* is 'Extracts from the Journal of Henry Luxulyan', a story which may owe something to Arthur Conan Doyle's short story 'The Case of Lady Sannox' (1894). Doyle's story tells of a surgeon named Douglas Stone who carries on an illicit, adulterous affair with the Lady Sannox of the title. The surgeon is tricked by his mistress's husband into performing an operation in which he cuts away her lower lip, without anaesthetic. He goes mad when he realises what he has done. Lady Sannox, now hideously deformed, retreats from society and is heard of no more.³⁷ Symons's story takes the motif of a female mutilation which is also brought about because of sexual infidelity, and examines its effects on an 'innocent' bystander, rather than on the main protagonists in the drama of adultery.

The extracts from Luxulyan's journal make up the bulk of the story. But before we meet him in his own words, the extracts are prefaced by some remarks from an anonymous narrator (who may or may not be the same narrator as speaking persona of 'A Prelude to Life'), who insists that his connection with Henry Luxulyan is purely

accidental. When Luxulyan died, he directed that his papers should be sent to the narrator, despite the fact that their acquaintance has been only casual. The narrator introduces the diary writer as a fellow townsman of his, whom he had scarcely known. Luxulyan appeared to be clever, and had spoken from time to time of a massive research project of him on the life of Attila the Hun; this was to be his life's work. The meetings of narrator and protagonist had been sporadic, and the last time the two had met, it was at a dinner-party in the house of a German baron and his wife. Luxulyan had become the baroness's librarian, and apparently, also her friend. But he 'looked ill and restless' (254), and 'seemed almost pathetically alone; but I remembered that he had never cared to be otherwise' (255). Some months later, the narrator heard that his acquaintance had broken down, and was in Venice trying to recover; but he had died there.

It is the story contained in Luxulyan's sporadic journal which is the substance of the story. The narrator considers it to be of sufficient interest to print, but he feels the necessity of framing Luxulyan's words with a prologue and epilogue.

The journal opens with a visit paid by Luxulyan to his doctor in which he reveals a morbid fear of death; his 'nerves are seriously out of order' (257). On the doctor's advice, he resolves to get out more, and to relieve his morbid frame of mind by contact with other people. At a dinner party in the wake of this resolution, he meets a woman, the Baroness von Eckenstein, for whom Luxulyan feels at once attraction and repulsion:

Her figure was firm, ample, almost majestic, and the face had once been not less finely designed, but over the whole left side, from the forehead to the neck, there was a great white scar, shapeless, horribly white, and scored with deep cuts, which had formed cicatrices of a yet more ghastly white. ... I dared not look at her, and yet, in spite of myself, my eyes kept seeking her face. (262-3)

Almost inevitably, Luxulyan meets her again, also at a dinner party. But on this second occasion, he cannot see her disfigured left side because he is seated on her right; and he is struck that she is 'the most accomplished woman I had ever met' (270). The Baroness invites him to become librarian, on very generous terms which will enable him to continue his own research; and Luxulyan decides to fight against his disgust at

her disfigurement. He accepts her offer, but finds working in the Eckenstein household a strain because of the clearly uneasy relationship between the Baroness and her husband, which he intuitively knows has something to do with her scar.

He eventually learns her story. Earlier in the journal, he had commented that the Baroness's scar reminded him of a vitriol scar he had once seen on a woman whose rival had thrown vitriol in her face; at that time, he 'was far from supposing any such vulgar tragedy in the household of the Eckensteins!' (273) But a vitriol incident is indeed the explanation. The Baroness tells him that, as a young, unhappy and unloved wife, she had taken a lover; her husband had taken his revenge on her face, seeking to take away the only value apportioned to a woman — her beauty — and that he had rendered her thereby unlovable.

It becomes clear to Luxulyan that the Baroness has singled him out from her acquaintance as a particularly sensitive man of principle, who will feel for her, and who might fall in love with her. She seeks to make him, that is, the instrument of her revenge on her husband. She wants him to fall in love with her, to show that love is not dependent merely on physical appearance. Luxulyan is torn by this. He cannot escape the fact that he finds her appearance repulsive, but he recognises that she has been mistreated, and, moreover, that she has treated him well. He owes her a debt of gratitude; she has stirred his sympathy; and his principles tell him that he ought to help her. Moreover, because he cannot base any affection he feels for her on an aesthetic ideal of beauty, he is forced to reassess his previous prejudice that women are not fully human because they play the role of woman constantly. Women, he says to himself, early in the story:

are not made, as we are, all of a piece; ... Think of the daily basis of their life: how many times a day they dress and undress themselves, and all it means. With each new gown a woman puts on a new self, made to match it. All day long they are playing the comedian, while we do but sit in the stalls, listen, watch and applaud. (269)

But in his relationship with a woman who cannot 'play the woman', Luxulyan is forced to rethink his own sense of masculine wholeness. He submits to the Baroness's

feelings, and becomes her lover out of pity, from principle and because he also wishes to further her revenge.

The love affair is, of course, destructive because on Luxulyan's part it is motivated by emotions which have nothing to do with love — for love, despite all his principles, remains a matter of physical attraction, not of moral positioning. He remains consistently aware, that is, that 'the same physical horror will always be there' (313). If one of the reasons for taking up the affair was to end the Baroness's suffering, then the affair is a failure. The Baroness sees his revulsion and suffers because of it. Moreover, the affair also fails as an act of revenge on the Baron because his reaction is merely a 'curious and mocking interest' (313). It becomes clear that he had never loved his wife, and that he had mutilated her not from wounded sentiment, but from wounded pride. All he wanted from her was submission; her desperately unhappy love for the librarian, and the librarian's inability to control his physical repugnance, are both evidence for the Baron of the power he had, and still has, over his wife. His victory seems complete because the Baroness's disfigurement does indeed prevent her from being loveable, even to a man who has tried desperately to love her.

The curious *menage-à-trois* continues for five years until Luxulyan can tolerate the split between his aesthetic sense and his moral principles no longer, and he breaks down. He becomes ill and is sent to Venice to recover. Lying there on his death bed, he writes in his journal of his sense of impersonality and the unrootedness which is the result of his alienation from ideals of physical beauty. 'The world, ideas, sensations, all are fluid, and I flow through them, like a gondola carried along by the current; no, like a weed adrift on it' (327). The split in him is a dialectic born of decadence, and it kills him.

The story ends with an epilogue supplied by the framing narrator. He tells of a chance encounter with the Eckensteins, and of his decision to pay his respects to his acquaintance's 'benefactors'. When, however, he calls at their house, he discovers that the Baroness has been dead for two days, and has been buried that very morning. His

impression is that the grieving husband is merely acting the part of the grieving husband when he accepts the narrator's condolences:

The Baron received me with almost more than usual ceremony. His face wore an expression of correct melancholy, he spoke in a subdued and slightly mournful voice. He told me that his beloved wife had succumbed to a protracted illness ... he thanked God for having taken to himself so admirable, so perfect a being, whose loss, indeed, must leave him inconsolable for the rest of his life on earth. He spoke in measured syllables, and always in the same precise and mournful tone. I found myself unconsciously echoing his voice and reflecting his manner, and it seemed to me as if we were both playing in a comedy, and repeating words which we had learnt by heart. I went through my part mechanically and left him. ...I do not know why I felt a cold shiver run through me, for the sky was cloudless, and it was the month of June. (328-9)

The part played by the narrating figure, in this story as in others in the collection dramatises one of the themes of the stories. The narrator, like many of the characters, is also an observer who stands, for the most part, outside the frame of the stories he tells. He acts ostensibly as a distancing device who gives the reader whatever sense of perspective s/he possesses. But the fictiveness of his quasi-objective position is displayed here. In observing the stories, he becomes part of them, as demonstrated by his mechanical reflection of the conventional part played by the Baron; they both act as one is supposed to act in circumstances of bereavement. What chills the narrator is the knowledge that the Baron's gestures (and, indeed his own responses to them) have nothing to do with the real emotions engendered by the events of the story. Like Luxulyan himself, that is, the narrator finds himself caught in the decadent space of between, in this case, in the space between conventional response — acting out the part of conventionality — and real feeling. This is life lived out as ritual, and it is not necessarily a very attractive proposition. The conventions which enable life to go on one level — ideas such as honour, duty, gratitude for Luxulyan, conventionally polite behaviour for the narrator — can equally act as fetters which make life unbearable. One must either sacrifice aesthetic perfection and live out a lie; or one must break free into the realm of truth without any obeisance to social principle.

Similarly, in the central story of *Spiritual Adventures*, 'The Death of Peter Waydelin,' much of the impact of the story comes from the point of view of the narrative voice. The story announces its tragic pathway in its title. It is also perhaps

the most clearly decadent story of the collection in its theme of the doomed and alienated artist. Peter Waydelin is a painter of coarse, brutal pictures, and again, a casual acquaintance of the anonymous narrator who is puzzled and repelled by Waydelin's art. The narrator's distaste is a function of his belief in the artist/work homology; he cannot see the brutality of Waydelin's art as consistent with the man he knows. On a holiday in Bognor Regis, they walk along the coast together and discuss the meaning of art:

I tried to piece together the man and his words. What was it in this man, who was so much the gentleman, that drew him instinctively, whenever he took up a brush or a pencil, towards gross things, things that he painted as if he hated them, but painted them always? Was it a theory or an enslavement? and had he ... sunk to the level of what he painted? I could not tell. (159)

As the story progresses, it becomes clear that Waydelin himself shares the narrator's uncertainty about the distinction between his life and his art. He proceeds in his art from the belief that it is impossible to be an artist and not live out the life implied by one's artistic preference. Art and amateurism are contradictory: to be an artist, one must *live one's art*:

'I wonder if it is possible to paint what one doesn't like, to take one's models, and only know them for the hours during which they sit to you in this attitude or that. I don't believe that it is. Much of our bad painting comes from respectable people thinking that they can soil their hands with paint and not let the dye sink into their innermost selves. ... You can't paint the things I paint and live in a Hampstead villa.' (164)

Waydelin takes this line of argument to its logical conclusion, and lives the life inspired by his art work. He takes a coarse and unattractive chorus girl as his wife; she is described by the narrator as 'a deplorable person, with her carefully curled yellow, hair, her rouged and powdered cheeks, her mouth glistening with lip salve, her big empty blue eyes with their blackened underlids, her fat arms and shoulders, the tawdry finery of her costume' (167). But it is not these sordid facts about the girl in themselves which provoke the disgust of the narrator. Symonds himself dwells on the pleasures of make-up and costume when he describes the dancing-girls of his poetry. What the narrator finds so unpleasant is that an artistic perspective is impossible in the intimate atmosphere of the lodging which the Mrs Waydelin shares with her husband. When he visits Waydelin there, the narrator is close enough to see the workings of the chorus-

girl's artistry; without the distance between the woman and the observer implied by the existence of the footlights (when she's working), or of the frame of the picture (when Waydelin uses her as his model), he finds what he sees revolting. Both men watch with something approaching horror as Waydelin's wife puts on her make-up and takes it off again at the end of an evening. Waydelin comments rather wryly on the subject of his unsatisfactory marriage, that he has 'no gift for domesticity' (161), for the intimate realities of living with another person in straitened circumstances.³⁸

Waydelin is a man obsessed; there is a fatal and fanatical lack of logic in his position about the relationship between life and art. He speaks, early in the story, of his determination to represent the brutalities of life as they really are. But his view of reality is too selective. He is a painter *only* of 'mysterious, brutal pictures' (157) because mystery and brutality are the only things he sees. His art, he suggests, is intended to be a conflation of the techniques of Whistler and Verlaine — images which are 'nothing but the fine shades, ... bodiless, ... songs almost literally "without words"' (161). Yet, it is the body, with what Waydelin portrays as its inherent ugliness, which attracts all of his attention. His insistence on ugliness is perverse; and his rejection of nature as a subject for either art or serious conversation eventually comes to haunt him. As he lies dying, he describes how the colour green has become an obsession in all his work, despite his efforts to suppress it; it is as if nature were getting her revenge on his 'unnatural' art:

There is something like the temptation of the devil, to me, in the colour green. ... [I]t is the commonest colour in nature, it is a good honest colour, it is the grass, the trees, the leaves, very often the sea. ... To me it is an aniline dye, poisoning nature. I adore and hate it. I can never get away from it. If I paint a group outside a café in Montmartre by gas-light or electric light, I paint a green shadow on the faces, and I suppose the green shadow isn't there; yet I paint it. Some tinge of green finds its way invariably into my flesh colour; I see something green in rouged cheeks, in peroxide-of-hydrogen hair; green lays hold of this poor unhappy flesh that I paint, as if anticipating the colour scheme of the grave. (176-7)

This green is not the green of nature, but the 'greenery-yallery' of an art which is sickening and which represents the sickness of the artist. It is also the colour associated

with the works of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, whose art was also concerned with the brutality of Parisian night-life in the halls, cafés and brothels.³⁹

Waydelin's life is a failure. He dies in the presence of the narrator and his wife, whom he tries as his last act to fix into art, an image of awfulness as the 'tears ran down her cheeks, leaving ghastly furrows in the powder which clotted and caked under them,' (185) but he can no longer guide the pencil to draw her, and he closes his eyes in despair and dies. He dies, nonetheless, convinced that his art will properly valued once he is dead: 'He was quite certain that [his paintings] would sell,' comments the narrator. 'He knew exactly the value of what he had done, and he knew how and when work finds its own level.' (173) Thus, whilst the artist's life has been worn out in the pursuit of his aesthetic dream, the art itself is seen to survive. The narrative, however, does not make it clear whether the reader should see Waydelin's death as a price worth paying for his art. The reader is denied the security of certainty, and shares the narrator's own position of not knowing.

How we identify the narrator in these stories has a crucial effect on our interpretation of them. This is a voice which eschews authority; its refusal to commit the narrative to any totalising interpretative point of view unites these tales in the denial of stability and certainty. The narrator's identification with the rootlessness of the people whose lives he discusses makes it impossible for him to judge them, since he shares their confusions and uncertainties. The depth of aesthetic feeling in the realms of painting, music and literature is presented paradoxically as a route to anaesthesia, the inability to feel, and to extend feeling into an imaginative sympathy with the lives of others. The characters and their narrator fail to see other people as real: other people are always objectified, made into the subject matter of their various modes of art, but denied real subjectivity. Consequently, like their narrator, the characters all inhabit a world of decadent neurosis. Their lives are dominated by the 'big ideas' of beauty and art. But ordinary life makes no allowances for them. Their dreams are like opium dreams — simultaneously attractive and illusory. They lack the ability to put their lives

into perspective, which, for Richard Le Gallienne was the definition of literary decadence.

The real core of decadence is to be found in its isolated interests. Its effects are gained by regarding life as of but one or two dimensions. ... Decadence ... comes of the decadent regarding his theme *in vacuo*, isolated from its various relations — of morality, of pity, of humour, of religion.⁴⁰

In these terms, the actress's art of representation without feeling emotion, or the painter's inability to see life steadily and whole, are decadent. For Peter Waydelin, the art of the painter consists in 'train[ing] your eye *not* to see,' in 'seeing in a new summarising way, getting rid of everything but the essentials' (161, my emphasis). It is precisely the inadequacy of a summarising view of the world which also kills Henry Luxulyan. He begins by seeing women only as exteriors, constantly dressing up and 'playing the comedian'; but through his intimacy with the Baroness, he is forced to realise that life is more than a comedy of manners, and that women have internal lives just as men have. She makes him understand that a 'woman's love is a wholly serious thing. ... Passions ... are real things in women and ... one cannot always hold aloof from them and go by on the other side' (310). The existence of other sentient beings in the world makes demands on him which he is temperamentally unable to meet.

In reading these stories, the narrator positions the reader in his own space as an observer. We are not asked for sympathy when we read these tales. We are asked to observe the gulf between self and other, not to cross it. The narrator's vision is 'a religion of the eyes' (53); we and he look, but do not touch, and are not ourselves touched. The narrator remarks in 'A Prelude to Life' that he is haunted by 'some spectacle' which it is his aesthetic duty to pursue. But here, pursuit does not imply the telos of capture. The aesthetic attitudes represented by each of characters are only available as spectacle. Isolation and alienation are the price of their positions in aesthetic attitudes. And decadence is figured as residing in that isolation which is at once splendid and tragic. It is also gendered, since the female figures are made to be looked at, the males to do the looking. As such, *Spiritual Adventures* makes explicit the messages which are merely implicit in Symons's poetry. The *flâneur* is the masculine

figure of the city, observing as he goes, valuing all sensation from whatever source, in a contemporary urban version of Pater's 'passion' which yields 'this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness'.⁴¹ Women, as we shall see in the next chapter, are the aesthetic spectacle he observes.

Notes

¹ See, for example: R. K. R. Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), Chapter 6, pp. 134 ff; Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (eds), *Decadence and the 1890s*, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies, 17 (London: Edward Arnold, 1979); Jan B. Gordon, 'The *Danse Macabre* of Arthur Symons's *London Nights*', *Victorian Poetry*, 9 (1971), 429-423; Tom Gibbons, *Rooms in the Darwin Hotel: Studies in English Literary Criticism and Ideas* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 1973); Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* [1957] (London: Ark Paperbacks, RKP, 1986).

² T. S. Eliot, 'The Perfect Critic' [1920] in Frank Kermode (ed.), *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 52.

³ Ian Fletcher, 'Symons, Yeats and the Demonic Dance' in *W. B. Yeats and his Contemporaries* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987), p. 253.

⁴ Eliot, 'The Perfect Critic,' p. 53.

⁵ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry, the 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1980), [1873 text] p. 190.

⁶ Arthur Symons, 'Walter Pater, Some Characteristics', *The Savoy* 8 (December, 1896), 33-51, p. 51.

⁷ John Lucas, 'Hopkins and Symons: Two Views of the City,' in John Stokes (ed.), *Fin de Siècle/Fin du Globe: Fears and Fantasies of the Late Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 62.

⁸ W.B. Yeats, 'The Tragic Generation,' in *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 302.

⁹ Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 87 (November, 1893), 858-868, p. 861.

¹⁰ Arthur Symons, *London: A Book of Aspects* [1908], reprinted in *Cities and Seacoasts and Islands* (London: W. Collins and Co. Ltd, 1918), p. 155.

¹¹ This is not to say that Symons never writes about the rural landscape; but his countryside is certainly not Wordsworthian. Instead, it tends to be a verbal representation of an impressionist painting, where nuanced descriptions are shrouded in sea mist. Many of his landscape poems are prefaced with dedications to, or evocations (through their titles) to painters such as Walter Sickert. An example is the poem 'At Dieppe' in *London Nights*, dedicated to Sickert, and sharing the title and the mood of one Sickert's paintings.

¹² Françoise Barret-Ducroq, *Love in the Time of Victoria: Sexuality, Class and Gender in Nineteenth-Century London*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 9-10. For the middle-class woman, the streets were a forbidden site because they were perceived as dangerous and threatening to her class status. At the end of Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins*, Dr Galbraith is horrified to discover Evadne walking alone in the streets of Piccadilly, and recognises it indeed as an index of her poor state of mental health:

had one seen her there on foot in the morning, one would have surmised that she was out shopping, and looked for the carriage which would probably have been following her; but a lady, striking in appearance and of distinguished bearing, alighting composedly from an omnibus at Piccadilly Circus between nine and ten at night ... was a sight which would have struck one as being anomalous.

Sarah Grand, *The Heavenly Twins* [1893] (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 616.

¹³ Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1992), p. 16. See also Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation and the City* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995).

¹⁴ Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*, 2 volumes (London: Macmillan and Co., 1885), Volume 1, p. 26. Walter Benjamin, writing of Baudelaire's *flâneur*, insists on contemplation rather than on action. He must, according to Benjamin be a man of leisure: 'Let the many attend to their daily affairs; the man of leisure can indulge in the perambulation of the *flâneur* only if, as such, he is already out of place.' (See Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* [London: Fontana Press, 1973], pp. 168-9.) 'Out of place' might here refer to the concept of masculinity, bound up as it is with ideas of productive work, as opposed to unproductive leisure.

¹⁵ Symons, *London: A Book of Aspects*, p. 154

¹⁶ Symons, *London: A Book of Aspects*, pp. 152-3. Symons is somewhat disingenuous in his description of the 'vague dubiousness' of the street which added to its charms. Holywell Street was a well-known haunt of pornographers throughout the nineteenth century. Peter Gay notes that by mid-century, the name Holywell Street was 'a synonym for obscene publications in general. In 1845, a raid on the premises of one purveyor in Holywell Street yielded 383 books, 351 copperplates, 12,346 plates, 188 lithographic stones, 3,572 pounds of type font.' See Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*, Volume 1, *The Education of the Senses* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 358. There was a concerted attempt to close down the pornographers' shops during the 1870s, during a campaign spearheaded by the Vice Society. But by 1880, the society had run out of money, and the pornographers who had fled to the continent had begun to return. What is more, 'chemist's paraphernalia' is a shorthand code for birth-control devices, particularly those intended for the procurement of abortions. That is, the dubiousness of Holywell Street was anything but vague. See also Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, p. 123.

¹⁷ The Ordnance Survey Map of London for 1897 (Sheet LXXVI, published in Southampton) shows Holywell Street to the north of the Strand, roughly halfway between the churches of St. Clement Dane and St. Mary le Strand, on the site of what is now the Aldwych Circle. It was demolished in 1902 as part of the process of cleaning up some of the 'vague dubiousness' of central London. I am grateful to Dr. John Brannigan for this information.

¹⁸ Symons, *London: A Book of Aspects*, p. 138.

¹⁹ See John Stokes, *In the Nineties* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 190, n.

²⁰ In *Marius the Epicurean*, Pater uses the word 'umbratilis' (literally, pertaining to a place in the shade) as a virtual synonym for 'unworldly'. See Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, Volume I, p. 26.

²¹ Symons, *London: A Book of Aspects*, pp. 137-145.

²² G. Robert Stange, 'The Frightened Poets,' in H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff (eds), *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, Volume 2 (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 451.

²³ Symons, *London: A Book of Aspects*, p. 140.

²⁴ Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: William Heinemann, 1899), p. 8.

²⁵ Laurel Brake, *Subjugated Knowledges: Journalism, Gender and Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), p. 151.

²⁶ Arthur Symons, 'A Prelude to Life,' in *Spiritual Adventures* [1905] (London: Constable and Co. Ltd, 1928), pp. 53-4. Subsequent references to *Spiritual Adventures* are to this edition, and are included in the body of the text in parentheses.

²⁷ Karl Beckson (ed.), *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons, Art and Life in the 1890s* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1977).

²⁸ Like the unnamed narrator in the story, Symons's father was a Wesleyan preacher who moved often in the course of his ministry. For an account of Symons's early life, see Karl Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

²⁹ Arthur Symons, Preface to *Plays, Acting and Music* (London: Duckworth and Co., 1903), n.p.

³⁰ Jan B. Gordon, 'The Dialogue of Life and Art in Arthur Symons's *Spiritual Adventures*', *English Literature in Transition*, 12 (1969), 105-117, p. 105.

³¹ Max Beerbohm, writing of a conversation held at the home of Leonard Smithers in 1896 (at a dinner to celebrate the launch of *The Savoy*), tells an anecdote which suggests that the tone of 'A Prelude to Life,' with its commitment to a vagabond existence, is indeed autobiographical. Beerbohm reports Symons as thinking that:

the nomadic life was the best of all lives for an artist. Yeats, in a pause from his own music, heard this too, and seemed a little pained by it. Shaking back the lock from his brow, he turned to Symons and declared that an artist worked best among his own folk and in the land of his fathers. Symons seemed rather daunted, but stuck to his point. He argued that new sights

and sounds and odours braced the whole intelligence of a man, and quickened his powers of creation. Yeats, gently but firmly, would have nothing of this. His own arguments may not have been better than Symons's; but in voice and manner and countenance, Symons was no match for him at all. And it was with a humane impulse that the hostess interposed. 'Mr Symons,' she said, 'is like myself. He likes a little change.'

This is the transcript of a broadcast on the BBC Third Programme in 1954 (published in *The Listener* for 6 January, 1955), but written, according to Beerbohm, in 1915. See E. H. Mikhail (ed.), *W.B. Yeats: Interviews and Recollections*, 2 volumes (London: Macmillan, 1977), Vol 1, pp. 28-29.

Ian Fletcher comments on the contrast between Symons's rootlessness and Yeats's commitment to the Irish nationalist cause, which gave him a sense of a stable identity. He suggests that Yeats's career can be seen 'as a successful attempt to control a successive set of identities' whereas in contrast 'Symons is the poet who failed in the search for a single identity.' Fletcher's argument is that the essential difference between the two men is that Yeats was able to manipulate many masks because he was sure of a stable identity behind the mask; Symons, on the other hand, had no such security, and his poetry therefore has a different premise. As such, the role of the *flâneur* or voyeur was the only position he could adopt. See Ian Fletcher, 'Symons, Yeats and the Demonic Dance' [1960] in *W. B. Yeats and his Contemporaries* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987), pp. 252-266, p. 254.

³² In this sense of the split, Symons predicts the central dilemma of Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, published 8 years after *Spiritual Adventures* in 1913. In Lawrence's novel too, the men are torn between an acute sense of physical need and their idealisation of women who were 'like their mother,' and therefore out of bounds in terms of sexual satisfaction. The sons of *Sons and Lovers* find the split in them fatal: it kills the older son, and does not kill the younger only because his mother herself dies before the split becomes too acute. See D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* [1913] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 340.

³³ Writing to his friend, Katherine Willard, in an attempt to dissuade her from becoming an opera singer, in December, 1891, Symons suggested that actors and actresses were unsuitable companions for a respectable girl, and that the performing arts bred immorality: 'I used to think at one time that it was merely a Puritan prejudice to look on actors and actresses as specially immoral people. But now that I have so many opportunities of seeing for myself, I find it is only the truth. They are, as a class, more uniformly immoral than any other class of people.' Symons's remarks here make his position about the theatre, and indeed, the reasons for his attraction to it, quite clear. Quoted in Karl Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 78.

³⁴ Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', pp. 858, 862.

³⁵ Part of the unease about Svengali (apart from the anti-Semitic implications of his outsider status as eastern European Jew) is that his attraction to Trilby is clearly sexual in origin. When he first meets her, he looks deeply into her mouth, recognising her as a fine physical specimen — an instrument rather than a consciousness in her own right — who will be strong enough to withstand the physical rigour of becoming the instrument of demonic musical genius:

'Himmel! The roof in your mouth is like the dome of the Panthéon; there is room in it for "toutes les gloires de la France", and a little to spare! The entrance to your throat is like the middle porch of St. Sulpice when the doors are open for the faithful on All Saints' Day; ...and your little tongue is scooped out like the leaf of a pink peony, and the bridge of your nose is like the belly of a Stradivarius — what a sounding board! and inside your beautiful big chest the lungs are made of leather! and your breath it embalms — like the breath of a beautiful white heifer fed on the buttercups and daisies of the Vaterland. ...'

See George du Maurier, *Trilby* [1894] (London: J. M. Dent, Everyman, 1992), p. 58. Du Maurier's illustration which accompanies this outburst emphasises Trilby's magnificent form in strong contrast to Svengali's cringing physique.

³⁶ Jan B. Gordon, 'The Dialogue of Life and Art in Arthur Symons's *Spiritual Adventures*', *English Literature in Transition*, 12 (1969), 105-117, p. 106.

³⁷ Elaine Showalter comments at length on this story in *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*. She argues that it is a tale of battle of the sexes in which female immorality is punished by a sexually motivated operation which deforms a once beautiful woman, and which also silences her.

That is, Lady Sannox's mutilation is an offence against both her sexuality and the power of female speech. See *Sexual Anarchy*, pp. 134-137.

³⁸ It's possible that Symons had Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891), or indeed Gissing's own life, in mind here. In Gissing's novel, the serious literary novelist Edwin Reardon is ruined by his marriage to a practically minded worldly woman who resents the poverty he has brought her into. He dies a broken man, and she marries his literary rival, Jasper Milvain, in a series of events which validate the wordly attitude to art over the niceties of artistic conscience. Gissing himself seems quite deliberately to have married two women who were not of his class and temperament, and whom he blamed for his 'failure' as a writer. According to Margaret Walters, he complained 'incessantly about his "domestic misery and discomfort", about his wife's inability to manage the servants, about the way that she and the baby intruded on his jealously guarded peace.' This mirrors Edwin Reardon's experience of losing the love of his wife to their baby because of their cramped and poverty-stricken circumstances. (See Margaret Walters, 'Introduction' to George Gissing, *The Odd Women* [1893] [London: Virago Press, 1980], n.p.; George Gissing, *New Grub Street* [1891] [London: Oxford University Press, 1958], Chapter 12, 'Work Without Hope,' pp. 161-173.)

Symons returns to this theme in the story of Christian Trevalga, the pianist of genius; the trajectory of the tale is based precisely on the suspicion that women and art (for the male artist) can never mix. Trevalga views woman as a 'beast of prey; rapacious of affection, time, money, all the flesh and all the soul, one's nerves, one's attention, pleasure, duty, art itself! She is the rival of the ideal and she never pardons. She requires the sacrifice of the whole man; nothing less will satisfy her; and, to love a woman is, for an artist, to change one's religion' (107). The aesthetic ideal and the ego of the artist are, for Trevalga, destroyed by any sexual intimacy, even when such intimacy is based on the ideal of love. Trevalga is driven mad by his inability to allow anyone to cross the gulf between him and the outside world. Similarly, Daniel Roserra, protagonist of 'An Autumn City' is forced to renounce his ideal of perfection — the city of Arles — because his wife cannot share it. He settles for a merely conventional marriage, which is figured in the story as a failure.

³⁹ Waydelin's obsession with the colour green appears to be a direct reference to Toulouse-Lautrec, who is reputed to have remarked to a friend: 'Do you know what it is like to be haunted by colours? To me, in the colour green, there is something like the temptation of the devil.' (Quoted in Julia Frey, *Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life* [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994], p. 145.) Richard Thompson has also noted that Lautrec took some pleasure from the fact that 'Green House' was the euphemism given by the Japanese to their brothels. (See Richard Thompson, *Toulouse-Lautrec* [London: Cresko Books, 1977], p. 71.) Thompson makes this comment in relation to Lautrec's 1891 picture, *At the Moulin Rouge*, in which the face of a female clown is tinted bright green. But he also notes that the obsession with green is a feature of most of his subject's paintings.

Holbrook Jackson, quoting Richard le Gallienne's *Prose Fancies* of 1896, suggests that green is one of the characteristic colours of the nineties:

Green must always have a large following among artists and art lovers; for ... an appreciation of it is a sure sign of a subtle artistic temperament. There is something not quite good, something almost sinister, about it — at least in its more complex forms, though in its simple form, as we find it in outdoor nature, it is innocent enough; and indeed, is it not used in colloquial metaphor as an adjective for innocence itself? Innocence has but two colours, white or green. But Becky Sharp's eyes were also green, and the green of the aesthete does not suggest innocence.

Quoted in Holbrook Jackson, *The 1890s* [1913] (London: The Cresset Library, 1987), pp. 168-169.

⁴⁰ Richard Le Gallienne, Review of John Gray's *Silverpoints* [1893], in *Retrospective Reviews: A Literary Log* (2 volumes), Volume 1 (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1896), pp. 229-232, p. 230.

⁴¹ Donald L. Hill (ed.), Walter Pater, *Studies in Art and Poetry. The 1893 Text*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1980), p. 190.

Chapter Six
A Poetics of Decadence
Arthur Symons's *Days and Nights* and *Silhouettes*

Because the stories of *Spiritual Adventures* are narratives, more or less sustained and with an imperative towards an identifiable telos, they necessarily have to come to an end, a conclusion about the tension between life and art. In the stories, the only resolutions possible are tragic ones of destruction, desolation, madness and death. In the more compact space of a lyric poem however, where image is more significant than narrative or moral, the poetic persona is absolved of the requirement to come to any conclusion, however provisional. The pleasure of the dialectic of decadence is emphasised in Symons's poetry, and becomes the locus of poetry itself. In his decadent volumes of the 1890s, *Silhouettes* (1892) and *London Nights* (1895), and, to a lesser extent, in the earlier volume *Days and Nights* (1889), Symons showed how dialectic of decadence — its Janus-faced position in the margins — must at once be acutely felt, and realised as important in its own right. In these volumes, decadence is figured as a resistance to any resolution of the decadent dilemma: there can be no final choice between the world and the other world, between reality and dream.

This is not to say that the decadent dilemma is not experienced *as* a dilemma, with all its attendant dangers as well as its pleasure, as Symons's professed self-disgust in his poem 'Prologue' from *London Nights* shows:¹

My life is like a music-hall,
 Where, in the impotence of rage,
 Chained by enchantment to my stall,
 I see myself upon the stage
 Dance to amuse a music hall. . . .

My very self that turns and trips,
 Painted, pathetically gay,
 An empty song upon the lips
 In make-believe of holiday:
 I, I, this thing that turns and trips! (*LN*, 170)

In the low-life context of the music-hall, the poem speaks of an awareness that the persona is always already just a thing. As in Wilde's poem 'The Harlot's House', excess of sensual pleasure reifies personality and 'kills' nature into art; in Wilde's poem, the persona is a marionette which is merely '*like* a live thing'.² Both poetic personae undergo a reversal of prosopopeia, in which flesh becomes art. As such, they both partake of Freud's definition of the uncanny in which doubts as to 'whether an apparently animate being is really alive, or conversely whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate' are central. 'The writer creates a kind of uncertainty in us at the beginning by not letting us know, no doubt purposely, whether he is taking us into the real world or into a purely fantastic one of his own creation.'³ The horror, in Wilde's poem as in Symons's, is that it appears that the writer himself does not know what is real or not; he shares in the uncertainty he has created.

In Symons's 'Prologue', the repeated personal pronoun, 'I, I' — assertive and yet unsure of itself as dramatised in the repetition — is set against the noun 'thing'. The objectification of personality is the horror of which the poem speaks. Yet at the same time, the speaker, from the very midst of his experience of self-loathing, and despite his realisation of the emptiness of his life in the music-hall, is also acutely aware of the 'enchantment' of this existence. The word is used in its double sense — to express both the pleasures of the senses which are available in the halls, and also to suggest the sense of being 'spellbound' in some sinister devil's bargain.

In an essay on Huysmans, first published in 1900, and significantly entitled 'The Choice,' Symons identified two escape routes from the decadent dialectic — reality and idealism — suicide and conversion: self-destruction or self abnegation. But he also suggests that there may be a third route, which breaks down the binary opposition between a commitment to the soul (through religion) or a commitment to Woman (the sensual and sexual real world):

Yet perhaps the choice is not quite so narrow. ... perhaps it is a choice between actualising this dream or actualising that dream. ... [O]ne man chooses religion and seems to find himself; another, choosing love, may also seem to find

himself; and may not another, coming to art as to a religion and as to a woman, seem to find himself not less effectually?

He goes on in an echo of both Pater and Wilde to say that 'the making of one's life into art is, after all, the first duty and privilege of every man'.⁴ But the real point of this essay is that choice is never possible: the decadent, by his 'nature', is unable to reject any of the options — life, art, woman, religion, sensuality. Experience itself, rather than the fruit of experience is what counts, so nothing which represents experience can be rejected. The decadent must remain trapped in his dilemma, and he must savour his entrapment as yet a further example of experience.

In Symons's poetry, as in his prose fiction, decadence depends on a split, on the pursuit of antithesis. The decadent has to be aware of the moral codes against which his life and his art offend, and he must take pleasure in the offence. What one finds in his poetry is a subject matter which deliberately offends some part of audience, with its insistence on frequent and bizarre sexual encounters, and on the attractions of artifice in such encounters. The encounters offend by crossing boundaries of taste and decency, but also of class and culture. The middle-class poet consorts with the working-class girl artiste; her dancing and singing belong to the working-class context of the music-hall, but the poet makes it into a subject of 'high' art by making poetry from it. The girls he writes of are excluded from the poetry, whilst they are central to it as its subjects, because they will not read it. And respectable women are excluded because they should not read it. The offence comes from making explicit the basis of sexual relations which should be implicit — silent, unspoken; and from an unmanliness which is an offence against the class code of the gentleman which is at once a function of speaking the unspeakable, and of openly transgressing the boundaries of class.

The poet is also, however, acutely aware of the personal cost of his offence, even whilst he glories in its pleasures. The problem with sensuality is that it is also transitory, and the poet feels flat in the morning. The poetry therefore has a double emphasis on pleasure and the pain of its transitoriness; and this takes place in the context of a detailed observation of the responses of the speaking self — of the poetic

persona's self-consciousness. Since the poetry deals in ecstasy (literally meaning to stand outside oneself), self-consciousness dramatises the decadent double-bind. There is a simultaneous quest to lose self-consciousness through pleasurable (aesthetic and/or sensual) experience, but the articulate art of poetry reinforces self-consciousness. In writing of one's experience, it is necessary to know that experience, and by extension, to know the self which has that experience. Symons's own definition of decadence enunciates that contradiction: 'To fix the last fine shade, the quintessence of things; to fix it fleetingly; to be a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul.'⁵ In this ideal of decadence, it occupies a space between oppositions: between fixity and transitoriness; between shades and quintessences; between a universal, unspecified ('disembodied') voice, and the individuated and specific 'voice of a human soul'. The decadent poet, therefore, necessarily has a double vision of himself — as both an 'I' and a 'thing'.

***Days and Nights* (1889)**

Symons did not begin his poetic career with a fully fledged aesthetic of the inherent tensions of decadence. John M. Munro argues that Symons began as a 'Victorian' poet, heavily influenced by Browning (about whom he had written a book at the age of twenty one).⁶ He traces Symons's development from high Victorian to Decadent, to Symbolist, to proto-Modernist; and he describes Symons's greatest achievements as those of the 1890s volumes of poetry, which Munro identifies as the period of Symons's decadence.⁷ His first volume of poetry, *Days and Nights*, is read by Munro as typical of a Victorian aesthetic. The poems have 'too obvious a dependence on literary sources', he says,⁸ a criticism which has some basis in Symons's extensive adaptation of the dramatic monologue form he had learned to value from his readings of Browning. This influence was also noted by Richard Le Gallienne, when he reviewed *Silhouettes*, and compared the technique and range of the two volumes. If Verlaine and Whistler are the dominant influences of *Silhouettes*, he suggests, then Browning 'and perhaps Mr. Meredith' were more important to *Days and Nights*.⁹ And many of the

poems appear, indeed, to ascribe to that moral and didactic frame by which Victorianism is often defined. 'Magdalen on the Threshold,' for example, is reminiscent of William Holman Hunt's painting, *The Awakening Conscience* (1853), in which the material advantages of a 'sinful' life are pictorially juxtaposed with a newly found quest for virtue. Magdalen's lover offers her 'Kisses, my Magdalen,/Kisses, and lights, and scents, and sounds, and songs!' (DN, 73) But as in Hunt's picture, his 'erewhile heeded charms' have become 'like a jarred harpstring when the chords/Sound harsh and coarse that once were sweet and clear' (DN, 74, 73). Or again, in 'An Act of Mercy,' which owes much to Browning's madhouse tale, 'Porphyria's Lover' (1836), the derangement which follows from the breaking of faith between husband and wife is dramatised. The woman's infidelity is punished by her husband to the death, and it is a punishment dependent on her refusal to conform to the feminine standards of behaviour demanded by men. He could forgive her adultery, but not her refusal to 'resume that mask [she] wore,/ ... to say fair words, nor look fond looks.' In her refusal to play the part of a loving wife, she becomes a threat to her husband; she is 'so superb in guiltiness,/So young in guilt' that she might engulf him. And when she laughs at him for being a cuckold, 'He knew the measure of the cup/She poured and set for him to drink it up' (DN, 71-2). Her mockery and her power make him mad and murderous, and he kills her.

But whereas Browning, in his murder monologues, directs our sympathies, Symonds resist a 'Victorian' sympathetic certainty. In a poem like 'An Interruption at Court,' where a father pleads for clemency on behalf of his daughter, the father's love and the daughter's sin are played off, not against each other, but against the implacability of the court's procedure. The daughter's 'callous, case-hardened and impenitent face' is only a mask which is displaced by emotion to reveal the truth of an 'unutterable agony — the light/Of the quenched innocent years.' Her external and her internal lives are both presented to the court — and they inform each other; the meaning of her life is the conflation of her sin and the affection which she has unconditionally, by right, from her father, which might be seen as a decadent position. But the critique

written into the poem has nothing to do with the girl's criminality (which is proven in the court case, and which had to be assumed from the moment it was revealed that her name is 'Jenny', the name also of one of Rossetti's fallen women). Rather, society through its representatives in the law court refuses to act in accordance with the possibility that the fallen woman is redeemable through love, even though it is moved — 'The very judge seemed touched' — by the father's love. Its rigidity is signalled in the inexorable fact of the poem that 'the case went on' (*DN*, 43-46).

Throughout this early collection, the masks imposed by social convention are placed against the truths of a real emotional life. That social convention generally wins is figured in the silences which are imposed on wrongdoers. In 'An Interruption at Court,' Jenny herself never speaks; in a poem called 'A Revenge', a woman caught out by her husband in adultery is punished by retirement to the country, where he never speaks to her (*DN*, 9-11). In the articulate art of poetry, silence signifies defeat. For Symons, life is both animate and animal; feelings must be spoken as well as experienced. At crucial moments in *Days and Nights*, his poetic protagonists fall silent and their failures to express shame, sorrow, forgiveness, or love is the sign of their annihilation.

Hélène Cixous has argued that binary oppositions are always based on a hierarchy in which one of the terms is conventionally privileged over the other.¹⁰ She locates the hierarchy as one which is definitively based in gender, so that the less privileged term is also always the feminine term. Decadent thought often depends on the hierarchy of opposition and, for writers like Wilde, often gets its effects by rejecting the privileged term in favour of the lesser term of the opposition. So, for example, body is more important than spirit or soul; disorder is more important than order; artifice is more significant than nature.¹¹ But the essential point for the decadent in Symons's writing is not to make the choice at all, but to inhabit the space between the oppositions. The binary is invoked but not re-inscribed, as it would be through a simple reversal of its hierarchical positioning. The space between the binaries, however, is never a space of equilibrium where equal and opposite forces meet and cancel each other out.

In two very different poems in *Days and Nights*, 'The Wood Nymph' and 'The Opium Smoker,' Symons dramatises the inability of the two speakers to achieve any resolution of their decadent double vision. The Wood Nymph, belonging as she does,

Part to the gods, the bright gods whom I see
Flash through the woods at even or at morn, and make
The beautiful familiar trees seem strange;
And part to mortals and their little life,

comes to wish that she could lose all consciousness of her ambiguous 'between' position, and learn simply to 'be':

Green leaves that cover me ...
 ...Will you not teach me how to live your life, ...
 ...live
 In peace and quietness and still content,
 And freshen and fade and freshen and have no care,
 And have no longing, full of peace to live,
 Forgetting thus forever life and death
 And gods and men and sorrow and delight. (DN, 31-2)

The tension between mortal and immortal life renders the nymph's life tragic, pulled as she is by the incompatible attractions of the 'bright gods' and the 'mortals and their little life'; she lives in flux. But to achieve equilibrium — a balance between these conflicting claims — is a form of suicide. The poem suggests that it is impossible to sustain a constantly heightened sense of emotion in which there is no resting place; but to see merely to 'be' without self-consciousness is not to 'be' at all. It is a form of suicide. And the flux of opposition might well be better than non-existence.

In the sonnet, 'The Opium Smoker', Symons explores the same tensions in a different context. For eight lines, the speaker is engulfed in a synaesthetic dream with 'soft music like a perfume, and sweet light / Golden with audible odours exquisite'. But when the pipe is empty, at the sestet, the real world intrudes, and the smoker's poverty of both mind and body return:

Also I have this garret which I rent,
This bed of straw, and this that was a chair,
This worn-out body like a tattered tent,
This crust, of which the rats have eaten part,
This pipe of opium; rage, remorse, despair;
This soul at pawn and this delirious heart. (*DN*, 92)

On the one hand, the 'moral message' of the poem seems quite clear. Its ending in 'rage, remorse, despair' implies that the pleasures of opium are too fleeting and too costly to be worth the pain they cause. On the other hand, however, there are still eight lines of pleasure before the six lines of pain. The two parts of the poem inform each other. The pain is a condition of the pleasure and vice versa. The opium dream gives the addict access to an atemporal zone ('time is no more'), provides aesthetic dreams of 'soft music ... and sweet light', and momentarily resolves the tension between fixity and flux: 'I pause and yet I flee.' At the turn, we confront instead the squalor of the addict's reality, his filthy rooms, his poverty, his broken down body and his self-loathing personality.

John M. Munro cites this sonnet as evidence of Symons's Victorianism. It has, he suggests, decadent promise, but he pays more attention to the sestet with their 'emphasis on the moral degradation of the addict' than on the dream world which is a temporary escape from the degradation.¹² The poem itself, however, does not support this reading. The sublime and the squalid are spatially (or typographically) as well as narratively separate. This poem shows explicitly what later poems would only imply. The good times and the bad times — or any set of binary terms — define each other, but cannot be experienced simultaneously. The formal space between octet and sestet dramatises that separation; between the parts is void in which there is silence. Real time and dream time (timelessness) are not in opposition to each for the speaker of the poem. For him, the two kinds of experience never meet; and neither version of his life has any authority. Only those who stand outside the poem, with the perspective which decadence denies to the speaker, can read the complete situation and make connections of cause and effect. But the poem does not demand that of us. No moral judgement is explicit in the poem; the dream has its attractions and the reality its horrors. Indeed, the reality justifies the dream rather than focusing on 'the moral degradation of the addict'. The space where moral judgement comes in is silent in poem — the gap between the two parts — and it does not make the relation between cause and effect explicit.

Silhouettes, 1892

In his next volume of poetry, *Silhouettes*, Symons moves away from the dramatic monologue into the lyric mode. In the 'Prologue' to *Days and Nights*, Symons said his muse would sing 'less of Days than Nights' (DN, 5), but the wide range of contents in the volume, with its vast cast of characters, at least implied that light was still possible. *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* are both significantly darker titles, and are more unified and muted in terms of tone and content. The monologue form which encourages a diversity of situation and emplotment is displaced in favour of lyric 'simplicity'; and the poems increasingly work through implication rather than direct statement. The relatively compact space of the lyric leaves more to the imagination of the reader who must intuit the schema within which the poet is working.

With *Silhouettes*, Symons's poetry moves decisively to the contemporary city, and it provoked a rash of critical opprobrium because of its 'artificial' qualities and because its subject matter (now often of dubious sexual encounters) was so clearly set in the here and now, rather than displaced into the long-ago and far away worlds of dramatic monologue. In answer to his critics, Symons wrote a preface to the second edition (published in 1896), in which he attacked the habit of poets and their critics of assuming that poetry could only properly take nature at its subject. Romantic ideas of the landscape had been the staple of literary expectation since the beginning of the nineteenth century, he argues. Those ideas do not therefore need to be reiterated, and it is no threat to their value if the poet on this occasion turns 'for a change' to writing 'a good poem about the scent in the sachet' rather than the scent of new-mown hay.¹³ The hayfield, Symons argues, has become a habit, and Pater had taught him that 'our failure is to form habits.'¹⁴ Poetry about nature had come to be taken for granted, and the 'ingenuous reviewer' who had provoked Symons's preface had done no more than expect that his own prejudices and expectations about poetry would be fulfilled by *Silhouettes*. Following Wilde, Symons claims that Nature is no more the proper subject of poetry than anything else. But, of course, his choice of the city, with its artificial

lighting, multiple chance encounters, and painted women, was not an 'innocent' choice. As Jonathan Culler argues, we always read and write 'in relation to other texts, in relation to the codes that are the products of these texts, and go to make up the culture'.¹⁵ Symons, that is, knew that his subject matter had the capacity to upset his audience, and he played quite deliberately on that knowledge, bringing forbidden matter into the respectable public space of poetry.

What the poems of *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* establish is that there is a *frisson* to be enjoyed in exposure to views which we do not necessarily share; such views open up the possibility of diversity of opinion and disrupt the naturalisation of the views of the majority. Shaw defined barbarism as thinking that the laws and customs of the tribe are the laws and customs of nature.¹⁶ The hyper-civilised discourse of decadence, in the context of the yellow nineties exemplified in the yellow press, opens up fissures in the solid, bourgeois views of the world, its morality and its culture. The pleasures which Symons suggests are derived from the artificial scent of patchouli are a deliberate poetic act of political non-conformity which were read as such in the run-up to and aftermath of the Wilde trials — hence his need to defend his poetic work in the prefaces he wrote to the second editions of both *Silhouettes* and *London Nights*.

We have seen that definitions of decadence depend on who is using the word. When Symons himself chose the label ('The Decadent Movement in Literature,' published in 1893, is part of the context of production of *Silhouettes*) he was aligning himself with an exciting and innovative poetic tradition. But when other commentators used the word, they used it with moral opprobrium, and associated it with nasty French habits and low standards of sexual morality and promiscuity. As Brian Stableford argues: 'In the eyes of upright Victorians, all French literature seemed dreadfully decadent, and "decadent" was freely bandied about as a term of abuse, which carried a distinctly xenophobic implication. ...[T]he term ... was used — promiscuously, one might say — to refer to moral licence and moral laxness.'¹⁷ Thus even the aggressively heterosexual Symons was associated with charges of being 'UnEnglish and Unmanly',

using a similar matrix of associations with foreign contamination which was also used to condemn the homoerotic implications of Anglo-Catholicism. It was not necessarily the object of desire which provoked a hostile response, but the explicit acknowledgement of desire itself.

Symons's poetic technique in *Silhouettes* depends on his reading of Pater's assertion that a 'certain suppression and vagueness' was required for true artistic achievement.¹⁸ There is, that is, a refusal to state any position — moral or immoral — explicitly. And the lack of any explicit moral framework implied both decadence and immorality. Symons's technique in this collection depends on the effects of meiosis (understatement) and periphrasis in a poetic which presents images without a narrative framework; it is an experiment in literary impressionism, with subject matter derived from Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec and forms from Verlaine.¹⁹ The poems in the collection constantly contrast artifice and nature, with nature generally occupying the place of the less valued term in this binary because it is seen as fragile and evanescent. The narrative elements of the poems are pared to the bone. There is very little description, and no discussion or justification within the poems themselves of their own existence. This is an art which resists moral interpretations, which insists on the value of 'experience' rather than the 'fruits of experience', and which exists therefore, as nearly as possible, 'for its own sake'.

The conscious insistence on the artificial in poems such as 'Pastel: Masks and faces' or 'Maquillage' was not explained by Symons until he was provoked to write his preface to the second edition. But implicit in the poems of *Silhouettes* is the comparison between natural effects with those of make-up and artificial light. The disembodied woman in 'Maquillage' is described in the terms of nature:

Gracile and creamy white and rose,
Complexioned like the flower of dawn,
Her fleeting colours are as those
That, from an April sky withdrawn,
Fade in a fragrant mist of tears away
When weeping noon leads on the altered day. (*S*, 107)

This 'natural' complexion, however, depends entirely on the 'charm of rouge on fragile cheeks', on powder, kohl, and the sachet perfume of violets. Nature here is fading, fleeting, altered: the woman herself is 'fragile' and the power of her image depends on the artifice with which it has been created. The charm is in the rouge, the 'lustre' in the dyes with which she has painted her face; her voice is reduced to 'a voice of violets that speaks / Of perfumed hours of day and doubtful night, / Of alcoves curtained close against the light.' The description evokes a synaesthetic sensual response. The woman's voice is not so much heard as smelt, implying a physical intimacy between speaker and subject. Her voice has no words — she is, in Verlaine's terms perhaps, a '*romance sans paroles*' — but her scent conjures up visions of private spaces in which poet and lady can make love. Artifice produces the impression of nature, just as for Wilde, it was nature which imitated art:²⁰ the natural world is imaged as a painted woman, with all the associations of corrupted beauty and guilty love which Symons had for this phrase.²¹ Without her artificial allure, neither the woman nor her poet-lover exists. His fascination with her self-creation through artifice is the *sine qua non* of sexual gratification, and the cause of the poem itself. The woman's artifice is the condition for the poet's art.

In this poem, both poet and lady are impersonalised in the world of art. The speaker never identifies himself with a personal pronoun: and the possessive pronoun 'her' — the only such identifier in the poem — refers to the dawn, not to the woman. They are both unspecific. The woman could be anyone; the painted face disguises the personality and perfume masks the voice in synthetic violets.

Art and artifice are not however synonyms: artifice is not so permanent as Art. Moreover, the artifice of make-up is a specifically feminine route to the creation of the artistic self. Throughout *Silhouettes*, Symons represents women metonymically through their manifestations of artifice in their clothing, make-up and perfume. The essence of woman is externalised onto her appearance in a decadent rewriting of the Medieval blazon device in which the woman's parts are enumerated in praise of the female form which reflects its glories back on the male gazer. His good taste, his poetic

prowess and his own attractions are central to such a poetry. But, in the Medieval blazon, the emphasis is on the qualities which can be seen: hair, eyes, lips, breasts. For Symons, seeing remains important, but the focus is softer because his enumeration of feminine charms, the poems imply, is conducted at far less distance than the Medieval original, where the woman was often placed on a distant pedestal. In the case, the poet does not merely *see* his mistress: he touches, hears and smells her too. Seeing is inhibited by the intimacy of the situation which makes perspective difficult, and by the low light ('Drawn blinds and flaring gas within') associated with lovemaking; desire is also expressed therefore in the other senses.

Often then, it is those aspects of femininity which cannot be seen that are selected to represent the 'essence' of woman. In the poem 'Perfume,' the object of the poet's desire is defined by the sensuality of her scent:

Shake out your hair about me, so,
That I may feel the stir and scent
Of those vague odours come and go
The way our kisses went.

Night gave this priceless hour of love,
But now the dawn steals in apace,
And amorously bends above
The wonder of your face.

"Farewell" between our kisses creeps,
You fade, a ghost, upon the air;
Yet ah! the vacant space still keeps
The odour of your hair. (S, 130)

Perfume is her essence, both in presence and absence. The poem clearly charts a sexual encounter, but the poetic voice seems to derive as much pleasure from the woman's perfume as from her bodily presence. He only looks at her as a secondary and less important part of the amorous process, and seeing her renders her not more, but less, real. Dawn makes her a ghost, but the ghost has a substantial reality since the 'vacant place still keeps / The odour of your hair', so that perfume is a metonym both for the woman and for the sexual encounter. Her presence or absence — her objective reality — finally matters less to the poet than the sensuality implied by her perfume, than his own impression.

The aesthetic of the present/absent woman with whom the artist/poet is both intimate and from whom he remains distant is familiar from the art of the Pre-Raphaelites who made a particular point of implying a fatal but attractive autonomy in their representation of women.²² The Pre-Raphaelite woman is simultaneously fleshly and real, and ideal and untouchable. In Rossetti's representation of Elizabeth Siddal as *Beata Beatrix* (c. 1864), the woman is a virtually disembodied presence rendered by a quasi-impressionistic technique which dramatises her status as an unfleshly vision. On the other hand, he also presents woman as an emphatically embodied solid, real presence, as with his many paintings of Fanny Cornforth. But in his unrequited passion for Jane Morris, Rossetti combined ideality and fleshliness in his multiple depictions of her, by suggesting both her corporeal weight and her other-worldly untouchability.²³

Symons's perfumed mistress is to be understood in these two ways: as a perfumed essence, she is ideal, and she retains her ideality because she is an untouchable ghost, a 'vague odour'; but at the same time, the perfume is part of her artifice, and as such, is intended to excite a more bodily, tangible response. The result of the conflation of these two oppositions is a decadent position of ambiguity, occupying a space between the real and the ideal. Woman is thus a central category in defining the male decadent position which she embodies and disembodies. The space she occupies is one in which her hair is loose, and where kissing takes place — even if it does so under the shadow of 'farewell'. There is a real body which makes an impression on a real pillow and leaves a real scent when the body itself has departed. Ideality (absence) and intimacy (presence), which are usually seen as mutually exclusive oppositions are collapsed into each other in this poem and in others. The boundaries between 'Woman', a particular woman, and women in general, are collapsed in decadent aesthetic in its masculine guise.

The tension between ideal and real is expressed in a manner which is quiet and understated. The poems imply (though seldom state) the hopelessness of the decadent position, but they do not suggest that despair is the logical outcome of inhabiting the

contradictory space between oppositions. The tone of the poems implies an acceptance of inevitable disappointment as another mode of experience; the split which, in the sustained narratives of *Spiritual Adventures*, is forced to conclude somewhere, is here articulated without the logical outcomes of death, despair or suicide.

A poem such as a 'Quest' speaks openly but quietly about the hopelessness of love: 'I chase a shadow through the night,/A shadow unavailing' (*S*, 137). The woman who is the object of the quest is again imaged in terms of a dialectic between absence and presence: a shadow requires a body to cast it, but is not itself a body. Chasing shadows is a proverbial expression for engaging in hopeless activity, hence this quest is unavailing. What is being pursued is an impression, and its importance and interest reside in the fact that it is 'just' an impression, an intangible idea. Although the quest is impossible, the experience of it retains an importance and an aesthetic appeal as the poet watches his shadow take on the attributes of the light which both its cause and its possible destruction. The urgency of the pursuit is emphasised in the repetition of the object's existence of shadow, and in the reiteration of images of the blacks and whites of night and day. The object of the quest is, of course, a silhouette. Yet although the shadow can never be caught, the frame of mind in which the impossible still seems important and urgent is essential to the poem. The quest is also after all the traditional metaphor for an act of faith, though in this case the object is not a spiritual perfection but a consummation of sensual experience:

Out of the dark, into the light,
I follow, follow: is it she? ...

The shadow leads me through night
To the grey margin of the sea;
Out of the dark, into the light,
I follow unavailing. (*S*, 137)

The quest is doomed from the outset; it has no possible telos. The shadow disappears at daybreak, in the borderland between land and sea. But the repeated verb 'follow' is never abandoned, even though the chase is unavailing, because the experience of the chase is valued for its own sake. The decadent cannot be satisfied with either a fluctuating reality or the perfected stasis of art. Throughout the *Silhouettes* collection,

these oppositions come into play, and the key antithesis with which the poet must deal is that of the artistic need for distance (artistic perspective) and a personal need for intimacy (through ecstatic, erotic adventure). In as much as this antithesis can be resolved, it is to be resolved through the acceptance that an experience of loss or disappointment is to be valued artistically just as much as moment of perfection or consummation — the experience is valued equally with its fruits, or, indeed, its lack of them.

For Symons, then, the pursuit of all forms of experience is a serious endeavour in and of itself. Indeed, it becomes a compulsion, and the poet obsessively repeats the experience of chasing the shadow of an ideal woman as obsessively as he pursues the shadow in 'Quest.' He pursues her through many different landscapes, using the occasional natural scene, as in the 'Dieppe' section, merely as an aide-mémoire to recall a woman's face ('I gaze across the sea, remembering her' [S, 'Under the Cliffs', 102]); or it is seen as a landscape which evokes the private post-coital space of the bedroom: 'The sea lies quieted beneath / The after sunset flush / That leaves upon the heaped grey clouds / The grape's faint purple blush' (S, 'After Sunset', 98). But where in *Days and Nights* he had described or dramatised a wide range of marginal, outlawed personalities — criminals, prostitutes, and pathological avengers — in *Silhouettes*, only the fallen women remain, and they are not explicitly exposed to any traditional moral judgements. The essential change between the two volumes, however, is in the developing poetic technique of *Silhouettes*, in which *only* the impression of the moment can be discerned. The reader is now prevented from constructing readings where the issues of the moral high or low ground can be recuperated.

Michael J. O'Neal has called *Silhouettes* Symons's 'most "decadent" volume'.²⁴ In his commentary he concentrates on the poet's technique of producing distorted perspectives, analogous to the perspective tricks of the eponymous silhouette, which renders spatial relationships ambiguous. Or, as Tom Gibbons has put it:

By arranging noun images in linear sequences with few grammatical markers of cohesion ... Symons captures the dislocations of nascent thought where images succeed one another without distinction. In trying to find a linguistic equivalent for subjective emotions and ineffable thought processes, the poet calls on

syntactic operations that de-emphasize causal hierarchies and give prominence to phrasal constructions. ... The reader is left with a general apprehension of the object instead of an atomistic dissection of it. He is left with a silhouette.²⁵

The reader is absolved from having to choose exactly how the grammar fits together in a move which also alleviates the writer from the necessity of making his own position in relation to the poem clear. It was this indeterminacy which Symons both admired in Mallarmé's poetry and in Whistler's painting. In his essay on Whistler in *Studies in Seven Arts* (1906), he wrote:

Mallarmé, suppressing syntax and punctuation, the essential links of things, sometimes fails in his incantation, and brings us things homeless and unattached in the middle air. ... And so, in Whistler, there are problems to be guessed at as well as things to be seen.²⁶

A poem such as 'Pastel: Masks and Faces' stands at once for the technical experiment which Symons was conducting in poetic impressionism and for the consequent elusiveness of the moral judgement when the reader confronts the poem:

The light of our cigarettes
Went and came in the gloom:
It was dark in the little room.

Dark, and then, in the dark,
Sudden, a flash, a glow,
And a hand and a ring I know.

And then, through the dark, a flush
Ruddy and vague, the grace
(A rose!) of her lyric face. (S, 104)

This poem is the kind of thing which Lionel Johnson meant when he said that Symons was a slave to impressionism, whether the impression was valuable or not:

A London fog, the blurred, tawny lamplights, ... the slatternly shivering women: three dexterous stanzas telling you that and nothing more. And in nearly every poem, one line or phrase of absolutely pure and fine imagination. If he would wash and be clean, he might be of the elect.²⁷

His objection is to precisely the aesthetic which Symons was at such pains to develop. What one notices about such poems as 'Pastel' is that it seeks to tell you 'only that and nothing more.' The reader might try to construct a narrative from it, but the details are too sketchy. The dark setting, and the props of the glowing cigarettes create an

atmosphere of Bohemianism — slightly shady, or *louche*, as Frank Kermode puts it.²⁸ But with whom the poetic voice is smoking whilst waiting for the face he knows to become visible is not stated. And why do we not assume that the ringed hand betokens respectability — why is the ring not read immediately as a wedding ring?

As Michael J. O'Neal has argued, in a very technical discussion of Symons's syntax in this poem, it is the arrangement and word order of the poems which defeats any 'realist' analysis.

The second sentence is a fragment; its only verb is a dependent clause. The most prominent feature of the sentence is parataxis — the disjunction or loose relationship among its members, its refusal to place them in a hierarchical arrangement. ... [We are left] with information the poet apparently has not ordered, except as a recurrent cycle of images that 'went and came'.²⁹

Just as the poet cannot see because it is dark, so the reader is also left in the dark in the disjointed utterance of the poem which prevents any perspective or overview. We are asked to share the intimacy of the poem's situation, not to judge what is presented there, not least because we are not quite sure what has been presented. In Symons's next collection of poems, *London Nights* (1895), Symons continues his quest for the present/absent woman, most frequently imaged in the figure of the dancer, and he develops his impressionist poetic technique into a more fully realised expression of the dialectic of the male decadent writer.

Notes

¹ I have consulted the first editions of all of Symons's works in the British Library, and compared their contents with the edition of *The Collected Works* of 1924, projected as a 16 volume edition, of which only nine volumes were published by Martin Secker between 1924 and 1925. The poems with which I am most concerned, with one exception, were published in first and second editions between 1889 and 1897 (*Days and Nights*, Macmillan, 1889; *Silhouettes*, 1st edition, Elkin Matthews and John Lane, 1892, 2nd edition, Leonard Smithers, 1896; *London Nights*, first edition, Leonard Smithers, 1895, second edition, Leonard Smithers, 1897). And although groupings of some poems, and certain title headings are missing from the Martin Secker *Collected Works*, for ease of reference I have decided to use this edition. See Arthur Symons, *The Collected Works*, Volume 1, *Poems* (London: Martin Secker, 1924). References to page numbers from this edition will appear with an abbreviated volume name in parenthesis in the text. (*Days and Nights* = DN; *Silhouettes* = S; *London Nights* = LN.)

² Oscar Wilde, 'The Harlot's House' [1885], in Robert Ross (ed.), *The First Collected Edition of the Works of Oscar Wilde* (15 volumes), Volume 6 *The Poems of Oscar Wilde* (London: Methuen and Co, 1908), p. 249.

- ³ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' [1919] in Albert Dickson (ed.), *The Penguin Freud Library*, Volume 14, *Art and Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p.347, p.351.
- ⁴ Arthur Symons, 'The Choice,' first published in *Saturday Review*, 89 (24 March, 1900), 357-358; reprinted in Arthur Symons, *Studies in Prose and Verse* (London: J. M. Dent and Co, 1904), p. 290.
- ⁵ Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature,' *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 87 (November, 1893), 858-868, p. 862.
- ⁶ Arthur Symons, *An Introduction to the Study of Browning* (London: Cassell and Company, 1886).
- ⁷ John M. Munro, *Arthur Symons* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1969). Munro's chapter headings describe Symons in these terms.
- ⁸ John M. Munro, *Arthur Symons*, p. 25.
- ⁹ Richard Le Gallienne, Review of Arthur Symons's *Silhouettes* [October, 1892], in *Retrospective Reviews: A Literary Log*, 2 volumes, Volume 1 (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1896), pp. 181-183, p. 183.
- ¹⁰ Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties', in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtrivon (eds), *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980), p. 91.
- ¹¹ Jonathan Dollimore in *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 14-15, makes a similar point in relation to Wilde's inversion of the bourgeois norm.
- ¹² John M. Munro, *Arthur Symons*, p. 28.
- ¹³ Arthur Symons, 'Being a Word on Behalf of Patchouli', Preface to *Silhouettes*, 2nd edition (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896), pp. xiii and xiv; reprinted in *The Collected Works*, Volume 1, *Poems*, pp. 95-7.
- ¹⁴ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill, (London, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), p. 189.
- ¹⁵ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (London: Methuen and Co, 1981), p. 12.
- ¹⁶ George Bernard Shaw, *Caesar and Cleopatra*, Act III: 'He is a barbarian, and thinks that the customs of his tribe and island are the laws of nature.'
- ¹⁷ Brian Stableford (ed.), *The Dedalus Book of Decadence (Moral Ruins)* (Sawtry: Dedalus Ltd, 1990), p. 51.
- ¹⁸ Pater is here referring to the arts of the Renaissance which had 'that subtle and delicate sweetness which belongs to a refined and comely decadence.' Vagueness implies the refusal of the moral position. If nothing is stated, and particularly if the position of the majority is not stated, then the ambivalence of uncertainty can be read as immoral. See Pater, ed. Hill, *The Renaissance*, p. xxiii.
- ¹⁹ Symons knew Verlaine personally, and had brought him to England for a lecture tour in 1892. What impresses him about Verlaine is that his poetry suppresses meaning in favour of feeling. In an article on Paul Verlaine, published in the *National Review* in 1892, Symons comments on Verlaine's poetry as an art 'which suggests, with close lipped reticence, "things too *subtle* and too sweet for words".' It is, he says, an art of impressionism, 'all suggestion and evocation of sensation, a restless insistent search for the last fine shade of expression' — a remark which is a prequel to Symons's definition of decadence as a disembodied voice expressing a human soul in the *Harper's* article, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', published the following year. In the 1893 article, the central statement of decadence is applied specifically to Paul Verlaine. See Arthur Symons, 'Paul Verlaine,' *National Review*, 19 (June, 1892), 501-515.
- ²⁰ 'Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life,' says Vivian to Cyril in 'The Decay of Lying' [1889], in *Intentions* (London: Heinemann and Balestrier, 1891), p. 18.
- ²¹ See Arthur Symons, 'At the Alhambra: Impressions and Sensation,' *The Savoy*, 5 (September, 1896), 75-83: he comments, '[make-up] has, to the remnant of Puritan conscience or consciousness that is the heritage of us all, a certain sense of dangerous wickedness, the delight of forbidden fruit. The very phrase, painted woman, has come to have an association of sin; and to have put paint on her cheeks, through the innocent necessities of her profession, gives to a woman a sort of symbolic corruption' (p. 77).
- ²² Frank Kermode in *Romantic Image* makes a similar point when he quotes Rossetti's poem 'Lilith', in which the vampire woman appears to ignore the presence of the spectator, and remains 'subtly of herself contemplative.' At the same time, her autonomy also exercises a fascination over the male viewer, which entraps him. See Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* [1957] (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ark Paperback, 1986), p. 61.

²³ Jan Marsh in *Pre-Raphaelite Women: Images of Femininity in Pre-Raphaelite Art* (London: Guild Publishing, 1987), groups Pre-Raphaelite pictures of women under headings such as 'Nubile Maidens,' 'Doves and Mothers,' 'Holy Virgins,' 'Medieval Damosels,' and 'Allegories and Icons.' Portraits of Elizabeth Siddal and Jane Morris can be found under several of these headings, emphasising their place in Rossetti's conception of the decadent duality of woman as real and ideal category. Fanny Cornforth, on the other hand, who was Rossetti's long term mistress, had a fleshier reality; Rossetti dubbed her affectionately 'dear elephant' (Marsh, 23). And because of her solidity she appears only as a sorceress or whore. The paintings of the other two women articulate a greater ambiguity in the category of woman.

²⁴ Michael J. O'Neal, 'English Decadence and the Concept of Visual Perspective', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 25 (1983), 240-251, p. 243.

²⁵ Tom Gibbons, *Rooms in the Darwin Hotel: Studies in English Literary Criticism and Ideas* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 1973), pp. 76-7.

²⁶ Arthur Symons, *Studies in Seven Arts* (London: Arthur Constable and Company, 1906), p. 122.

²⁷ Quoted by R. K. R. Thornton in *The Decadent Dilemma* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), p. 141.

²⁸ Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image*, p. 57.

²⁹ Michael J. O'Neal, 'English Decadence and the Concept of Visual Perspective,' pp. 210-211.

Chapter Seven
Telling the Dancer from the Dance
Arthur Symons's *London Nights*

To watch a ballet from the wings is to lose all sense of proportion, all knowledge of the piece as a whole, but, in return, it is fruitful in happy accidents, in momentary points of view, in chance felicities of light and shade and movement. It is almost to be in the performance oneself, and yet passive, with the leisure to look about one. You see the reverse of the picture. ... The ballet half seen in the centre of the stage, seen in sections, has, in the glimpses that can be caught of it, a contradictory appearance of mere nature and of absolute unreality. And beyond the footlights, on the other side of the orchestra, one can see the boxes near the stalls, the men standing by the bar, an angle cut sharply off from the stalls, with the light full on the faces, the intent eyes, the grey smoke curling up from the cigarettes: a Degas, in short.¹

This quotation, from an essay in *The Savoy* in 1896, is a slightly belated statement of the aesthetic principles which underlie Symons's 1895 collection of poems, *London Nights*. In fact, only around a quarter of the seventy or so poems which make up the collection are directly concerned with theatre or dance, though many of the others imply, from their context among the overtly theatrical poems, a *demi-mondaine* world of stage-door johnnies and chorus girls who meet after the show.

Symons's fascination with the ballet in this passage is a peculiarly explicit statement of a decadent position. It draws on a forbidden setting into which the public is not supposed to enter, the wings: a space between the public arena of the stage and the private preparations for entrance into that arena. The stage, in Symons's evocation of it here, is an exclusively feminine space — and the audience is exclusively male: the (female) dancers are watched and the (male) audience watches. Thus Symons's adoption of the liminal space of the wings is disruptive of the gender roles enforced by the theatrical experience. Like the masculine audience he watches; but he watches both the dancers and their audience as a voyeur of the sexual frisson which crosses the footlights. He is, he says, 'a spectator, but in the midst of the magic',² combining an understanding of the roles of both performer and observer and thereby becoming a member of both camps. His pleasure comes from seeing the mechanics of the spectacle

laid bare before him, in seeing 'how lazily some of [the dancers] are moving, and how mechanical and irregular are the motions that flow in rhythm when seen from the front.' From his position, the spectacle, directed towards the front of the house, is dislocated and distorted. He is incapable of seeing the whole effect — indeed does not wish to see the whole effect — which, as Richard Le Gallienne argued, when he wrote of 'the euphuistic expression of isolated observations', is a primary symptom of decadence.³ 'In the general way,' Symons says, 'I prefer to see my illusions clearly, recognising them as illusions, and yet, to my own perverse and decadent way of thinking, losing none of their charm.'⁴ Decadence here is located then, in the liminal space where artifice can be detected, and its processes enjoyed both for their own sake and for the impressions they produce.

Symons's interest in how an awkward and ugly technique can be turned into beautiful spectacle, alongside his preferred location in the wings, aligns him with the feminine, and, further, aligns him with the dancer as conscious artist, deliberately using technique to produce (erotic) effects on her audience. His is the dancer's view, since at least part of what he chooses to observe is the men standing at the bar — 'with the light full on the faces' — who are as open to observation from the stage as the dancers themselves are on the stage. They too are part of an aesthetic effect, subject to the dancer's gaze through the altered perspective of the stalls when they are seen from the stage, the light which illumines their watching eyes, and the smoke which distorts their image, making them part of an Impressionist painting — 'a Degas, in short'. When Symons partially rewrote this piece for inclusion in his 1908 book *London: A Book of Aspects*, he made an essential connection between the aesthetic principles informing his poetry and the paintings of Edgar Degas:

I tried to do in verse something of what Degas had done in painting. I was conscious of transgressing no law of art in taking that scarcely touched material for new uses. Here, at least, was a *décor* which appealed to me, and which seemed to me full of strangeness, beauty and significance. I think that there is a poetry in the world of illusion, not less genuine of its kind than that more easily apprehended poetry of a world, so little more real, that poets have mostly turned to. It's part of the poetry of cities, and it waits for us in London.⁵

The claim to have been unconscious of artistic transgression is disingenuous. Symons could scarcely have failed to realise that his chosen subject matter — as well as his treatment of it — was almost certain to be viewed as unacceptable to polite society, and indeed, in the *Savoy* piece, that is made quite explicit. Part of the pleasure of looking at the young women on the stage comes from the fact that they are consciously artificial, wearing costumes ‘meant to appeal to the senses’, tights (which at once conceal and reveal the body), and, most importantly, make-up, which, as we have seen, has associations with sin and corruption. Moreover, his explicit alignment with the art of Degas in this passage, and his attraction to the art of Toulouse-Lautrec, both of whom distorted classic perspective and took as their subject matter dancers and music-halls seen from odd angles, is significant. Like their paintings, Symons's poems imply a simultaneous and contradictory commitment on the one hand to the proximity and intimacy of real life, and on the other, to the fixity, permanence and distanced perspective of high art.

Symons's reputation as a critic and partial midwife of modernist aesthetics, in particular through his 1899 book, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, owes much to Frank Kermode's 1957 book *Romantic Image*. But the parameters of the book also serve in part to distort Symons's poetic achievements, since Kermode is committed to an aesthetic which privileges the poetic philosophies of Symons's friend, W. B. Yeats. This is not to say that Yeats is not the greater poet. Rather, it is to suggest that to judge Symons's poetry of the dancer in terms of Yeats's aesthetic is to falsify the decadent contradiction which is at the heart of Symons's own position. Kermode describes Yeats's aesthetic as an ‘aristocratic ideal’, and remarks that ‘Yeats frankly admitted that he valued the barbarian aristocracy because it highly appreciated *activity* in men and *beauty* in women, valuing personal grace and not opinions.’⁶ Yeats believed, says Kermode, that:

It is the object of the artist's long labouring thought ... to produce what is passionate and rhythmical, but uncommitted, belonging to the body, and not the abstract intellect: having, in fact ... *a life of its own*. ... Beauty is the perfectly proportioned body; proportion comes first, passion afterwards.

For Symons, however, proportion and passion cannot be so easily separated. Proportion implies the artistic body — the body which cannot be touched since it exists in an impenetrable frame of art, and exists also in a public space, where intimate contact is impossible. Passion, on the other hand, requires proximity and (for its fulfilment) privacy and intimacy. From his favoured vantage point in the wings, Symons has simultaneous access to both passion and proportion, to both life and art.

Kermode describes Symons's poem 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge', a tribute to the dancer Jane Avril, much painted by Toulouse-Lautrec, as having a rather '*louche*' atmosphere about it,⁸ precisely because the fascination evinced by the poet for the dancer deliberately breaks down the *cordon sanitaire* between the dancer's body and the poet's response to it, a response which is simultaneously artistic and passionate or erotic. The art of the dance as expressed in Symons's poetry is an art which refuses to admit the demarcation line between audience and artist. Like Foucault's definition of transgression, it is only a momentary pleasure; it 'has its entire space in the line that it crosses.'⁹ It is illusory and elusive: it 'is not an illusion that can be repeated' says Symons.¹⁰ It is not simply a question of the poet describing the scene before him; in every case he breaks down the boundaries between the dancer's and the poet's respective arts, a breakdown which depends on the poet's admission that the dancer's art has a power and artistic value of its own. 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge' describes an evening at the famous Paris café-concert, during which Jane Avril dances simultaneously with other dancers on the floor, but also, alone, before the mirrored wall at the end of the hall.

La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge

Oliver Metra's Waltz of Roses
Sheds in a rhythmic shower
The very petals of the flower;
And all its roses,
The rouge of petals in a shower.

Down the long hall the dance returning
Rounds the full circle, rounds
The perfect rose of lights and sounds,
The rose returning
Into the circle of its rounds.

Alone, apart, one dancer watches
 Her mirrored, morbid grace;
 Before the mirror, face to face,
 Alone she watches
 Her morbid, vague, ambiguous grace.

Before the mirror's dance of shadows
 She dances in a dream,
 And she and they together seem
 A dance of shadows;
 Alike the shadows of a dream.

The orange-rosy lamps are trembling
 Between the robes that turn;
 In ruddy flowers of flame that burn
 The lights are trembling:
 The shadows and the dancers turn.

And, enigmatically smiling,
 In the mysterious night,
 She dances for her own delight,
 A shadow smiling
 Back to a shadow in the night.¹¹ (LN, 190-91)

Symons was to describe Jane Avril later in prose, in almost precisely the same terms, though adding in more detail:

She danced before the mirror, the orange-rosy lamps. The tall slim girl: the vague distinction of her grace; her candid blue eyes, her straight profile. She wore a tufted straw bonnet, a black jacket and dark blue serge skirt — white bodice opening far down a boyish bosom. ... The reflections — herself with her unconscious air, as if no-one were looking — studying herself before the mirror. ... [N]ever in my experience of such women have I know anyone who had such an absolute passion for her own beauty. She danced before the mirror under the gallery of the orchestra because she was *folle de son corps*.¹²

What becomes clear from both the poem and his later description of her, is that Symons's fascination with this particular dancer is dependent on the fact that her performance was always at least double. What one saw was a spectacle — a dance which had been put on for public consumption. Yet, at the same time, Avril's studied indifference to her audience, and her own self-absorption, gave the simultaneous impression that one was spying on private activity. After all, the most usual sphere in which a woman will gaze at herself in a mirror is the private space of the boudoir: and this confusion between private and public, between intimacy and art, is in part what fascinates Symons, as it had fascinated Manet in his depiction of Zola's *Nana*.¹³

Symons's technique in the poem, the anaphoric repetition of words and sound clusters,¹⁴ is his poetic representation of the circles which the poem describes — the lamps, the roses, and the circular shape of the dance itself. Kermode describes this poem as Toulouse-Lautrec's Jane Avril,¹⁵ implying that the dancer only has her place in Symons's poem because he is attracted to her representation in another man's art. But this belies the impression produced by the poem itself. One of the most famous of Toulouse-Lautrec's posters of Jane Avril shows her dancing on stage wearing a bright orange skirt, one of her famous large bonnets, and black stockings which can be seen because of the abandon of her dance. The bright colours and apparent energy of her movement are in strong contrast with the look of indifference, or even boredom, on her face.¹⁶ Another poster shows her as part of a dancing troupe, but she is deliberately not dancing in unison with the other three girls in the picture, and her leg kicks in the opposite direction from those of her fellow performers.¹⁷

Now whilst Symons describes her as being 'alone, apart', and as having the kind of artistic autonomy which fascinated the decadent consciousness ('She dances for her own delight'), and which Toulouse-Lautrec had imaged as her wilful independence on-stage, the point of the poem is that whilst the dancer is defined through her art — she cannot be a dancer if she does not dance — the woman, her personality, does not disappear into that art. That is, Jane Avril's art is self-assertive and self-expressive. We are not presented with the Yeatsian 'aristocratic ideal' of a perfect synthesis of life and art in which the woman's role is merely to be passively beautiful; we are presented instead with the doomed paradox of the simultaneity of life and art.¹⁸ The image of this dancer is a species of optical illusion in which two possibilities of interpretation are always present, but the two possibilities are not susceptible to synthesis. It is precisely the desire to see the woman and the dancer at the same time which so fascinates the poet and holds his interest as a spectator. As he writes in the *Savoy* article, he has a 'very human' interest in the spectacle of the dance:

I once took a well known writer ... to see a ballet. She had never seen one and I was delighted with her intense absorption in what was passing before her eyes. At last I said something about the beauty of a certain line of dancers, some effect of colour and order. She turned on me a half-laughing face: 'But it's the *people*

I am looking at,' she said, 'not the artistic effect.' Since then I have had the courage to admit that with me too it is the people, and not only the artistic effect, that I like to look at.¹⁹

In Symons's decadent poetry, that is, the dancer never develops to the point that Kermode, quoting Yeats, calls 'mere image'. What he does is to refuse the attempt to synthesise the binary oppositions of life and art, seeking instead to articulate an alternative position in which the oppositions are seen as both mutually contradictory and mutually necessary. For this reason, Symons does not write in terms of the dancer as symbol. Instead he consistently demonstrates his fascination with the dancer as conscious artist in her own right, watching (ideally from the wings) the processes which make up her art with the same care and attention that he pays to his own artistic, poetic technique. Indeed, in his 1918 collection of essays, *Colour Studies in Paris*, one finds, in an essay called 'Dancers and Dancing' (printed immediately after a reprint of 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge') a description of a visit paid by Symons to the dancer Nini Patte-en-l'Air in a London hotel during one of her London tours in the nineties. He comments that 'she takes herself very seriously; ... she is justly proud of being the only *chahut*[can-can] dancer who has made an art out of a caprice.'²⁰ There he saw Nini give a class to some younger women in the techniques of the *quadrille naturaliste*, a development from the can-can:

I saw the preparatory exercises, le *brisement*, or dislocation, and la *série*, or the high-kick done by two in concert; and the different poses of the actual dance itself: la *guitare*, in which the leg is held almost at right angles with the body, the ankle supported by one hand; le *port d'armes*, in which the leg is held upright, one hand clasping the heel of the boot — a position of great difficulty ... la *jambe derrière la tête*, a position which requires the most elaborate acrobatic training.²¹

His insistence on the technical terms, and on the difficulty of the dancer's art is plain to see. And at the end of the experience, he comments that 'it was all so discreet after a fashion, in its methodical order; so comically indiscreet in another sense',²² making it clear that the techniques of the dancer's art and their potentially erotic or outrageous effects when the private technique becomes public in performance cannot be separated.

The process undertaken by Symons then includes an understanding of the atmosphere or context in which the artistic experience takes place. In the case of the dancer, this includes the music to which she dances, and the other people also present in the room; the sights and sounds of the room, the music of the Waltz of Roses, and the rose formation of the chorus combine into each other in an approximation of synaesthetic experience. This is reflected in the syntax of 'La Mélite: Moulin Rouge' in which the boundaries between different forms of experience are elided, so that it becomes difficult for example to separate the music of the dance from the dance itself: 'The perfect rose of lights and sounds, / The rose returning / Into the circle of its rounds.' The very word rose, never an innocent choice because of its traditional use as a symbol for femininity and for the pleasures and pains of love, is denied a constant referent. It is the name of the music; it refers to the shape of the dance itself; it refers also to the women who dance waltz, who, as women, have a share in the rose's traditional metaphorical significance; and the real bloom is given a representative presence in the shape of the dance, since the real rose has a shape which is itself circular, with petals folding on petals, so that the observer of the rose — be it dance or bloom — is at a loss to discover either resting place or endpoint.

Jane Avril, the lone dancer, is thus all the more striking for her ability to break out of the larger circle of the chorus dance, since the circle has exercised a quasi-hypnotic effect on both dancers and audience. Yet in her position beyond the radius of that circle, she creates circles of her own. There is first the circle of her own absorption in her reflection in the mirror, imaged as slightly sinister, perhaps sterile or even masturbatory, since it excludes so forcibly from the dancer's consciousness any sense that she is dancing for more than her own delight, for a male audience beyond herself: 'Before the mirror, face to face, / Alone she watches / Her morbid, vague, ambiguous grace.' In his 1922 description of her, Symons comments that 'she had the reputation of being a Lesbian',²³ which reputation perhaps increased his *frisson* of pleasure in spectatorship, for of course, Jane Avril is not 'alone': she is acting as she might act in private, but for the public.

Moreover, the mirror, as a framed and unreachable space, is a space in which art takes place. That Jane Avril danced before a mirror, and consciously used the mirror's effects in her art, adds yet more interest to the decadent spectator. Since what happens in the (artistic) space behind the mirror's surface is utterly dependent on what occurs before it, it acts to emphasise both the relationship between life and art and their fundamental incompatibility. Thus the poetic spectator in the poem gazes on a liminal activity — on an art which depends on life, and on a life which depends on art. This paradox is what holds his gaze — the gaze of the (paradoxically) public voyeur. The poet and dancer are both trapped, that is, in another circle; the dancer is in the circle of her art whose production she watches, and the poet observes that circularity from beyond its boundaries, unable, as it were, to penetrate the circle's boundaries, unless it be in his poem where the practice of her art is matched by the practice of his.

For the artistic relationship to operate, the poet must admit the importance and autonomy of the dancer's art, and must also agree not to interfere in the space which she has created for herself. He cannot, one might say, cross the footlights from the space belonging to the audience to the space of the dancer, unless he does so imaginatively through his own art as a poet. Whilst the Symons of the poem does not explicitly speak of his own artistic and personal fascinations in the scene before his eyes, the insistent circularity of the sound and the syntax, imply a fascination bordering on obsession with what he sees. Given the impressionistic quality of the poem, with its almost free-floating signifiers and hazy, 'trembling' lights, under which it is impossible to see things steadily and whole, there is the suggestion that the poet seeks to intervene in the scene without disrupting it for fear of breaking up the artistry which attracts him in the first place. Finally the poet uses the dancer's art to enter into the poem. The mirror which is the centre of the dancer's attention can, of course, reflect more than the dancer in its surface — there is a space there for the poet as well. When it is said that the dancer 'dances for her own delight', this is partially belied by the very context in which it is said, in a poem which speaks of the poet's delight in watching the dancer, and which has as part of its intention, the desire to convey that 'delight' to a further,

wider audience of readers. In this case, the dancer is 'ambiguous' in part because of the liminality of her own activity; but she is ambiguous too because of the way in which the poet chooses to represent and interpret her. The last two lines, where we see the 'shadow smiling / Back to a shadow in the night', may be read in a number of different ways. It may be the dancer herself — in shadow because of the uncertain quality of the artificial light — smiling at her own image in the mirror, also a shadow since it has no substance. It may be the dancer's image smiling to the poet's image, or the dancer's image smiling to the poet himself; which in turn, since the reflection in the mirror requires a real life to cast its image, may mean by extension that the dancer smiles to the poet without the mediation of the mirror. Interpretation is conditional in this world where the 'orange-rosy lamps are trembling'; Symons's *Moulin Rouge* is a twilight place, where the half-light attracts the poet since it opens up more possibilities than bright daylight can, and it permits thereby the imaginative possibility of relationships between different people which different times, spaces and lights might forbid. Perhaps significantly, in at least one of Toulouse-Lautrec's posters of Jane Avril ('*Divan Japonais*, 1892'), she is to be seen not as a dancer, but as a member of the audience, subject of course to gaze of the spectator of the poster outside the frame, and subject too to scrutiny by another, male, member of the audience within the picture. In this representation of her, Lautrec shows her as a dancer who is not dancing, who has a life beyond the stage. It is that possibility at which Symons's poem hints.

In her book *The Art of Dance in French Literature* (1952), Deirdre Priddin has established that both Mallarmé and Gautier regarded the dance as essential to their aesthetic positions, but she also argues that they were proponents of opposing points of view which she characterises as the classical and the pagan respectively.²⁴ Gautier's ballet reviews are, for example, insistent on the extra-performative attributes of the dancer. Priddin quotes his general dictum that 'the first condition required in a dancer is beauty; she has no excuse for not being beautiful, and can be blamed for her plainness as an actress can be blamed for bad pronunciation.'²⁵ She also suggests that Gautier insisted that actresses and dancers had lives beyond the stage which were

essential to their artistic achievements and she quotes Gautier as saying, for example: 'An actress's real husband is the public. All that is not perhaps strictly moral, but nothing is more true.'²⁶ Gautier laid great stress on the humanity of the performers and on their physical beauty. In his description of the dancer Carlotta Grisi, he emphasises her feminine qualities, scarcely describing her dancing at all.

Carlotta, malgré sa naissance et nom italiens, est blonde ou du moins châtain clair, elle a les yeux bleus, d'une limpidité et d'une douceur extrêmes. Sa bouche est petite, mignarde, enfantine, et presque toujours égayée d'un frais sourire naturel. ... Son teint est d'une délicatesse et d'une fraîcheur bien rares; on dirait une rose thé qui vient de s'ouvrir. Elle est bien prise dans sa taille et quoique fine et légère, elle n'a pas cette maigreur anatomique qui fait rassembler trop souvent les danseuses à des chevaux entraînés pour la course qui n'ont plus que des os et des muscles. Rien chez elle ne trahait ni la fatigue ni le travail, elle est heureuse de danser pour son compte, comme une jeune fille à son premier bal; at cependant elle exécute des choses d'une difficulté excessive mais en jouant comme cela doit être.

[Carlotta, despite her Italian name and birth, has blonde, or rather, light brown hair, she has blue eyes which are limpid and extremely soft. Her mouth is small, sweet, childlike and almost always brightened with a fresh natural smile. ... Her complexion has a rare delicacy and freshness; she is almost like the bud of a tea-rose which has just opened. Her figure is well made, and although she is somewhat slim and light, she has none of that excessive thinness which too often makes dancers look like race horses, all bone and muscle. Nothing about her betrays fatigue or labour, she is happy to dance for her part like a young girl at her first ball; and although she executes the most difficult movements, she does so as if she were playing, as if she must do so.]²⁷

The terms in which Gautier defines femininity — as childlike, sweet, fresh — tends towards a definition of dance which regards it as a somehow lesser art: if the dancer is childlike, then her art is 'play' and is improvised rather than consciously constructed. With that implication, Symons would not have agreed. But he is likely to have been in sympathy with Gautier's emphasis on the dancer's person, with his insistence on the distinctively sexual allure of the dancer. This is at odds with Mallarmé's formulation of the meaning of dance, which is the example used by Kermode to explain Yeats's vision of the dancer as pure symbol:

A savoir que la danseuse *n'est pas une femme qui danse*, pour ces motifs juxtaposés, *qu'elle n'est pas une femme*, mais une métaphore résumant un des aspects élémentaires que notre forme glaive, coupe, fleur, &c., *et qu'elle ne danse pas*, suggérant par le prodige de raccourcis ou d'élans, avec autant que descriptive, pour exprimer dans la rédaction: poème dégagé de tout appareil du scribe.

[Know that *the dancer is not a woman who dances* for these joint reasons, *that she is not a woman*, but a metaphor resuming one of the elementary phases of form, blade, cup, flower, etc. *and that she does not dance*, but rather suggests, by the marvel of ellipsis and momentum, with nothing descriptive, expressive through the form itself: a poem disengaged from all the workings of the scribe.]²⁸

Mallarmé's aesthetic seeks ideally to separate personality from art, so that the dancer becomes a pure symbol. And the dancer is an ideal because in her movements she becomes a series of different forms ('blade, cup, flower') which have no logical link, which, indeed are linked only because the dancer, virtually unconsciously, represents all these things as she moves. The metaphors or symbols represented by the dancer are free floating and autonomous, resisting the stability of fixed significance.

It is on this view of the dancer that Frank Kermode concentrates in *Romantic Image*, since it is this view which is eventually adopted by Yeats. For example, the dancer in 'Michael Robartes and the Dancer' has a personality and a limited linguistic capability in argument, but she is no match for the intellectual male, and though she has the last word ('They say such different things at school'), she does not win the argument. Her only role, according to Robartes is the passivity of silence: she is made to be adored, not to be conscious of adoration. Symons's poetry may not finally be so achieved and complex as Yeats's is, but the philosophical doubts which his poems imply may be more significant than Kermode's dismissal of them as '*louche* manifestations' allows. Symons's aesthetic defies the absolutism implied by Mallarmé, and by Yeats's confident rhetorical question at the end of 'Among School Children': 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?' For Symons's work makes explicit a point which Mallarmé glosses over. For Mallarmé, as for Gautier before him, the dancer is always female — *la danseuse*. To insist on gendering the dancer female whilst simultaneously denying her womanhood — '*elle n'est pas une femme*' — is disingenuous. And Symons's reputation suffers because he does not subscribe to a vision of symbolic purity based on this inconsistency.

It is probably for this reason that Symons's verse never deals with the American dancer Loie Fuller, whose dance was all technique and no body. Fuller used the full modern force of electric light and the illusion of movement through elaborate cloths manipulated on long sticks. As Kermode suggests, in 'Poet and Dancer Before Diaghilev': 'The line of the body, never... the principal exhibit in her performance, grew less and less important, and in the end, hardly counted at all — witness those dances in which no human figure was perceptible to the audience.'²⁹ Moreover, although great technical expertise was necessary to put on Fuller's performance, the movements she executed were virtually improvised. The dance itself, independent of the technology, scarcely existed. Despite her fame, Symons never writes of her possibly because her art overbalanced into a purity of symbolic significance which had no relationship with his decadent ideal of the liminal dance.

In his essay 'The World as Ballet' (1898) Symons makes his own position about the meaning of dance, and the reasons for its attractions, abundantly clear:

The dance ... is art because it is doubly nature; and if nature, as we are told, is sinful, it is doubly sinful. A waltz in a drawing room takes us suddenly out of all that convention, away from those guardians of order who sit around the walls, approvingly, unconsciously; in its winding motion, it raises an invisible wall around us, ... in its fatal rhythm, ... which must rise into the blood, it tells us that life flows, even as that, so passionately, so easily and so inevitably. ... And now look at the dance on the stage, a mere spectator. Here are all these young bodies, made more alluring by an artificial heightening of whites and reds on the face ... offered to our eyes like a bouquet of flowers which have all the glitter of artificial ones.³⁰

Even in the conventional and polite society of the drawing room, dancing has its sensual side; it intoxicates the dancers even of the most innocent-seeming waltz, says Symons. The position he adopts towards dance and its meaning is distinctively masculine, and the transition from the respectable world of the waltz to the sleazier space of the music-hall or ballet is very swift, implying that the emotions engendered in men by both forms of dance are precisely the same, an idea he may have also have found in the models provided by French art. For example, in one of Renoir's paintings, *Danse à Bougival*,³¹ a young couple at a country dance are depicted. The young woman, in a bright red bonnet and white dress, looks down and away from her

partner; she seems entirely self-absorbed, carried away in the pleasure of the dance. Her bearded consort, on the other hand, looks directly into her face with utter intensity. The picture implies that the woman loves the dance, whilst the man loves the woman. She dances for her own delight, but he dances because it affords him proximity with a living woman and a living work of art. Neither painted figure is aware of their surroundings in the village square, where the ground is littered with cigarette ends and a posy of violets, presumably a love gift from man to woman which she has unconsciously dropped. The picture is both respectable and ambiguous, precisely the situation which Symons describes as typical of even the social dance of the drawing room. His description of the significance of the dance is unashamedly sexual, voyeuristic and almost paedophilic when he turns his attentions to the childlike dancers on the stage.

For Symons, the dance, whether you are a participant or a spectator, always implies some kind of contact with the dancing woman. In poems such as 'To a Dancer' and 'On the Stage', where the poetic persona is placed firmly in the observer's role, watching dancing on-stage from the stalls, he watches obsessively, and interprets what he sees as having a peculiar significance for him alone:

Intoxically
Her eyes across the footlights gleam,
(The wine of love, the wine of dream)
Her eyes, that gleam for me!

The eyes of all that see
Draw to her glances, stealing fire
From her desire that leaps to my desire;
Her eyes that gleam for me! ...

And O, intoxicatingly,
When, at the magic moment's close,
She dies into the rapture of repose,
Her eyes that gleam for me! (*LN*, 171)

Thus even from the stalls, the poet seeks to become a major part of the performance, interpreting what he sees with reference to himself. The dancer dances for him. The special nature of the dancer, and of the poet's relationship to the dancer, differentiates him from the mass of the audience:

You see the ballet so, and so,
From amethyst to indigo;

*You see a dance of phantoms, but I see
 A girl, who smiles to me;
 Her cheeks, across the rouge, and in her eyes
 I know what memories,
 What memories and messages for me. (LN, 181, my emphasis)*

‘If ever there was a religion of the eyes’, writes the narrator of ‘A Prelude to Life’, ‘I have devoutly practised that religion.’³² For Symons in his dance poems, looking is not only compulsive, it is reciprocal. The dancer is not a pure symbol, partly because of her technical expertise, partly because of the mechanics of stage production — the effects of artificial ‘lights in a multicoloured mist’, of deliberately assumed costumes, make-up, ‘wigs and tights’; but equally, she is not a pure symbol because Symons insists that she has a life beyond the stage, a life whose ‘memories and messages’ find their way into the performance.

The life beyond the stage is explicitly rendered in a number of the poems of *London Nights*. For Symons, the dancers are also women who dance, and who take their offstage experiences back to the theatre to enhance performance (just as Esther Kahn, the actress in *Spiritual Adventures*, learns to act emotion only once she has learned to feel it in her ‘real’ life). In poems like ‘At the Stage-Door’, the poetic persona waits for the girls coming out of the theatre, girls who retain the glamour of their profession even when they are no longer dancing:

*Under the archway, suddenly seen, the curls
 And thin, bright faces of girls,
 Roving eyes, and smiling lips, and the glance
 Seeking, finding perchance,
 Here at the edge of the pavement, there by the wall,
 One face, out of them all.*

*Steadily, face after face,
 Cheeks with the blush of the paint yet lingering, eyes
 Still with their circle of black ... (LN, 182, ellipsis in original)*

As with his observation of the chorus on the stage, Symons's persona takes in the whole scene, but he also waits for the one girl in whom he is especially interested. Even offstage, he continues to be a devotee of the religion of the eyes, waiting for the particular girl whose ‘child's heart’ is ‘blithe in the sudden and sweet surprise/...In the smile of her heart to my heart, / Of her eyes to my eyes.’ Again, in ‘Nora on the

Pavement', the dancer, who has left the theatre for the evening, keeps her artistry with her as she dances in the street. And again, she draws her audience to look at her through circular motions (like Jane Avril's) and the power of her eyes:

As Nora on the pavement
Dances, and she entrances the grey hour
Into the laughing circle of her power,
The magic circle of her glances,
As Nora dances on the midnight pavement; (*LN*, 173-4)

Nora, childlike and 'guileless' is 'innocently spendthrift of herself', becoming by the end of the poem almost the pure symbol of which Kermode writes. But the qualifying 'almost' is important, since whilst Nora forgets her self in her dance, her audience does not. The essence of this dancer, 'the very Nora', who 'leaps free' towards the end of the poem, is not a 'mere image', but a composite set of ideas which owes everything to her context on the midnight pavement, to her profession as a dancer in the circles of a ballet, and to the watching poet's sensibility which conflates the two parts of the dancer — the theatrical artiste and the street girl. She is both things at once. Her dancing in the street at midnight and her dancing on the stage earlier in the evening each inform the other, 'memorably re-incarnate her', says the poem. In both worlds she is both flesh and art.³³

It is this fascination with a life beyond art which makes the dance poems of *London Nights* more interesting than Symons's famous evocation of 'Javanese Dancers' in *Silhouettes*. In that poem, he comes much closer to a Yeatsian or Mallarméan ideal of the dance, in which the dancer is not identifiable as an individual woman. The four dancers in the poem all look the same, indistinguishable from each other either in appearance or in movement. There is no space for improvisation in the Eastern dance, and no recognition of the humanity of the artistes, whose art and whose race renders them utterly alien and other.

Still with fixed eyes, monotonously still,
Mysteriously, with smiles inanimate,
With lingering feet that undulate,
With sinuous fingers, spectral hands that thrill,

The little amber-coloured dancers move,
Like little painted figures on a screen,

Or phantom-dancers haply seen
Among the shadows of a magic grove. (S, 125)

Here the eyes of the dancer never meet the eyes of the spectator, and whilst the poet is clearly fascinated by the purity and artistry of what he sees, there is also something uncanny and incomprehensible about the spectacle. He does not understand the Eastern music which is 'dull, shrill, continuous, disquieting'. And he watches these dancers merely because they are different from the Western European models with which he is familiar. The Javanese dancers do not recur as an image in Symons's poetry as the music-hall dancers and ballet girls do. By the time he wrote *London Nights* Symons had already rejected the pure symbol and the 'mere image'.

Not unnaturally, Symons's interest in the 'real lives' of the women he sees on the stage laid him open to much criticism from those who reviewed his books, particularly since the women of whom he wrote were not all 'dignified' by an artistic profession. There are a number of poems in *London Nights*, most notoriously 'Stella Maris' (LN, 203-205), in which the artistic pretext for his relationships with street girls is conspicuously absent. He writes of one-night stands with prostitutes, where the attraction is sensual; but even here the emotions expressed are ambivalent since participants in passion are playing (quasi-artistic) roles which the poet, when he writes down these events, will turn definitively into art. In 'Dawn' for example, the young prostitute with whom the poet shares his bed sleeps 'the sleep of innocent tired youth'; her 'estate of innocence' is 'scarce lost' (LN, 206). The girl is childlike, sleeping, and therefore unconscious of the sin of her situation. The poet, on the other hand, is world-weary, and lies awake contemplating his part in her fall from grace, in the manner of the narrator in Rossetti's poem 'Jenny'. Both, that is, are playing the roles which literature has already established for them.

In 'Stella Maris', this is even more explicit. The title, meaning 'Star of the Sea', is one of the epithets traditionally given to the Virgin Mary by Roman Catholics. The title is an ironic evocation of virginity, since the woman in question is a prostitute whose 'heart holds many a Romeo'. The remembrance of his one night of passion with

this girl leads the poet to seek to replace one ideal of femininity with another: the virgin becomes the sexually competent and passionate lover.

Child, I remember, and can tell
 One night we loved each other well,
 And one night's love, at least or most,
 Is not so small a thing to boast.
 You were adorable, and I
 Adored you to infinity...
 ... I feel
 Your lips deliriously steal
 Along my neck, and fasten there;
 I feel the perfume of your hair,
 I feel your breast that heaves and dips,
 Desiring my desirous lips,
 And that ineffable delight
 When souls turn bodies and unite
 In the intolerable, the whole
 Rapture of the embodied soul. (LN, 204)

The studied blasphemy of the poem certainly upset some reviewers. An anonymous critic in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in early September 1895, reviewed *London Nights* under the heading 'Pah!', and made his disapproval clear.

Mr Symons is a dirty-minded man, and his mind is reflected in the puddle of his bad verses. It may be that there are other dirty-minded men who will rejoice in the jungle that records the squalid and inexpensive amours of Mr. Symons, but our faith jumps to the hope that such men are not. He informs us in his prologue that his life is like a music-hall ... By his own showing, his life is more like a pig-sty, and one dull below the ordinary at that. Every woman he pays to meet him, he tells us, is desirous to kiss his lips; our boots too are desirous, but of quite another part of him, for quite another purpose.³⁴

Yet whilst the poem is deliberately shocking and explicit, the lovers are nonetheless based — if somewhat tenuously — on literary models. If the woman's heart 'holds many a Romeo', then the poetic persona recalls her from many other such encounters in his own life:

Why is it I remember yet
 You, of all the women one has met
 In random wayfare, as one meets
 The chance romances of the streets,
 The Juliet of a night? (LN, 203)

The implication of the poem is that they played at love, and in their acting, found true rapture, suggesting yet again that Symons seeks the truly artistic experience in a space which is between life and art. The voice in the poem remembers this particular woman

because their experience together was extraordinary (or artistic) enough to be rescued from the oblivion of dozens of other such encounters.

Moreover, Symons's interest in the dancers continues even when they become too old to dance and too ugly to attract the eye. In a poem from *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1899), 'The Old Women', he describes the lives of dancers who have aged beyond their sexual attractiveness to the stage-door johnnies, and reflects on the pathos of their situation, as they try to recapture their lost youth, selling matches at the stage door to the new generation of male admirers, and telling them 'I too was a dancer, when / Your fathers would have been young gentlemen'. The poem reflects that women remember their experiences, their triumphs from the past, but that men forget them, and that such memories rescue the old women momentarily from the pain of their current situation:

Then you will see a light begin to creep
Under the earthen eyelids, dimmed with sleep,
And a new tremor, happy and uncouth,
Jerking about the corners of the mouth.
Then the old head drops down again, and shakes,
Muttering. . . .
And all these have been loved,
And not one ruinous body has not moved
The heart of man's desire, nor has not seemed
Immortal in the eyes of one who dreamed
The dream that men call love. This is the end
Of much fair flesh; it is for this you tend
Your delicate bodies many careful years,
To be this thing of laughter and of tears,
To be this living judgement of the dead,
An old grey woman with a shaking head.³⁵

For the poet, that a beautiful woman may be reduced to a 'thing' is a matter of sadness. In his poetry of the dancer, Symons resisted the woman's transformation into 'mere image' through his constant recognition that the woman had also a life beyond the stage. 'The Old Women' is remarkable because it takes that recognition a stage further, and shows that the women also have an existence beyond the period in which they are traditionally of interest to men. It is a humanising aesthetic in contrast to the cold, artistic purity of the Yeatsian or Mallarméan ideal. As Nelly Furman has argued, following the arguments of Claude Lévi-Strauss:

In a world defined by man, the trouble with woman is that she is at once an object of desire and an object of exchange, valued on the one hand as a person

in her own right, and on the other considered simply as a relational sign between men. At the intersection of two incompatible systems, woman appears as the embodiment of an impossible duality, the locus of an opposition.³⁶

It is precisely this 'impossible duality' that Symons values most in his poetry. He does not seek to solve the paradox, but to inhabit it for the sake of the heightened experiences, some pleasurable, some painful, it affords.

There is, however, a cost attached to inhabiting liminal spaces. In his high valuation of the women he sees on the stage, and in his insistent presence in the twilight city spaces which are forbidden to respectable people, the poetic persona begins to share in the contradictions lived by the dancers, just as he shares their streets and their hours. Symons's ideal space for watching the ballet — the wings — can also turn into a nightmare, as in the poem 'Prologue', where, as we have already seen, the poetic persona cannot tell whether he is spectator or spectacle.

When Symons collected his 1890s poems in 1902, into a two-volume edition, he added to the *London Nights* collection a second prologue poem entitled 'Prologue: Before the Curtain'.³⁷ The poem picks up on Symons's central metaphor for the conflation of life and art, its pleasures and its pains — a metaphor of the theatre. It is a poem in which the poetic persona accepts the inevitability of decadent liminality, and it insists — though quietly — that the experience of being caught amongst an infinity of variegated pulses in life can be beautiful as well as painful or dangerous, if its aestheticisation is allowed and accepted.

We are the puppets of a shadow play,
 We dream the plot is woven of our hearts,
 Passionately we play the selfsame parts
 Our fathers have played passionately yesterday,
 And our sons play tomorrow. There's no speech
 In all desire, nor any idle word,
 Men have not said and women have not heard;
 And when we lean and whisper each to each
 Until the silence quickens to a kiss,
 Even so the actor and the actress played
 The lovers yesterday; when the lights fade
 Before our feet, and the obscure abyss
 Opens, and darkness falls about our eyes,
 'Tis only that some momentary rage
 Or rapture blinds us to forget the stage,
 Like the wise actor, most in this thing wise.
 We pass, and have our gesture; love and pain

And hope and apprehension and regret
 Weave ordered lines into a pattern set
 Not for our pleasure, and for us in vain.
 The gesture is eternal: we who pass,
 Pass on the gesture; we, who pass, pass on
 One after one into oblivion,
 As shadows dim and vanish from a glass.
 January 7, 1896 (*LN*, 169)

I have quoted the whole of this poem because it is a complete summary of Symons's position as a decadent poet of the theatre and music-hall. There is an atmosphere of strong emotion in the poem, but the emotion, if not precisely recollected in tranquillity, is at least under the control of poetic technique. This is in part because these are the words of a puppet — of one who is controlled from beyond him/herself, rather than of one who is in control of his/her own destiny.

'Prologue: Before the Curtain' operates through the subversion of the generic expectations derived from traditional love poetry. The sincere expression of strong emotion is impossible in the world as Symons portrays it, since words do not communicate and emotion can only be acted, and it is better to recognise one's illusions as illusions: 'Men have not said and women have not heard.' Speaking one's love is only possible as a mode of performance, and the lovers in the poem are 'only' acting, since their real life feelings and actions ('And when we lean and whisper each to each / Until the silence quickens to a kiss') have been better portrayed by the actor and the actress who 'played / The lovers yesterday'. Here the pronoun 'we' refers both to the specific you and I' of the love poem, and to a more generalised, inclusive or universal 'we'. As Symons describes it, romantic love is anything but a natural flowering of emotion. It is rather an artistic performance, a matter of rehearsal, practice and technical skill, like the work of actors, which can be repeated at will once it has entered the repertoire. But like Esther Kahn's acting of love, it may equally be based on the powerful and painful feelings which are derived from real life. This view of love requires little in the way of personal commitment, but much professional pride. The poem does not contemplate involvement; the moments at which one feels the strongest passions are moments at which one becomes a wise actor, not a passionate person.

And at such moments, the lover/actor is both performer and audience — both spectacle and spectator, thus occupying a position analogous to the wings from Symons preferred to watch the dance.

An attitude of artistic disengagement is the ideal; but at the same time, one cannot but be involved in the performance of one's own life. The last eight lines of the poem, with their ambiguous use of the pronoun 'we' suggest a philosophy in which life and art are inseparable. That 'we' should 'pass and have our gesture' is significant in ways which prefigure Modernist aesthetics in which the general and the particular are simultaneously present. 'We' is both personal and general. The gestures 'we' perform are eternal, says the poem, and yet, at the same time, the gesture also 'passes' with its actor. Indeed, it becomes clear during the last eight lines that the verb 'to pass' is one with many possible meanings. It is a euphemism both for dying ('pass on') and for inheritance — passing on the gesture to future generations. But it also suggests that one passes other people at some distance which prevents a total engagement with them. There is both intimacy and contact as the past is handed on to the future, and the distance of 'passing by', as it were, on the other side, safe from being touched by emotion.

Humanity is reduced in this poem to the wisdom of mere performance. People are actors, puppets, shadows, images in distorting mirrors. This being the case, the dancer is the perfect representative of humanity since she is a woman who consciously uses her art both on-stage in a whirl of lights, wigs, make-up and tights, and offstage where traces of her art always remain. She is, says Symons, in the 'Proem' to the 'Violet' section of *London Nights*, 'the artificial flower of my ideal' (LN, 175). As a form of Nature overlaid with Art or artifice, she helps to produce in the poet the continually heightened state of awareness and emotion which is Symons's urban adaptation of the Paterian credo that one should seek 'to burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy'.³⁸ The Prologue poem is Paterian in both its philosophy and its tone.

The collection ends with a poem entitled 'Epilogue: Credo' which is a far more explicit homage to Pater. Here Symons argues that the man who 'has made his life his very own,/...has loved or laboured, and has known/A strenuous virtue, or a strenuous sin' (*LN*, 269), has not lived in vain, 'For he has saved what most desire to lose', namely an intensity of experience which is painful but which makes life worthwhile. The last two stanzas of the poem are a verse rendition of Pater's sense that to live without passionate discrimination is, 'on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening.'³⁹

For of our time we lose so large a part
In serious trifles, and so oft let slip
The wine of every moment, at the lip
Its moment, and the moment of the heart.

We are awake so little on the earth,
And we shall sleep so long, and rise so late,
If there is any knocking at that gate
Which is the gate of death, the gate of birth.

The poem acts in part as an excuse for the catalogue of implied immorality which the collection exhibits. This persona can at least point to the fact that he has been 'strenuous' in 'sin' should anyone accuse him of having wasted his life. The religious doubts implied by the final stanza — the half-stated belief that there is no God and no afterlife — conveys the Paterian message that one must live for experience itself, rather than for its consequences. The ideal of the collection was to seek methods for turning life into art, and thereby to ensure the validation of that life in the absence of any other moral criterion. Symons makes the decadent choice: he chooses the arenas of the city and the theatre as the landscapes of his poetry, and consistently seeks new sensations. And whilst he is in part responsible for the adoption of the word Symbolism into English, his own work is decadent because he refuses to privilege purity of symbol over the reality which it also contains. He remains insistently and deliberately trapped in the liminal space of decadence. The object of decadent desire is woman; its subject is the man who recognises in woman both flesh and symbol.

Symons's poetry also dramatises the relationship of sexual politics and decadence. His poetic persona is virile but not manly. The virility is evidenced by

continued passionate quest — which takes place both mentally and physically — for the ideal woman. But he is unmanly in that he speaks a passion which ought to remain silent, or unspeakable. Unlike the case of Wilde, this is not because his passion is illegal, an offence against explicitly articulated laws; but because it is illicit, an offence against unspoken but assumed definitions of masculinity in general, and definitions of the gentleman in particular. His poetic persona crosses class boundaries in his search for his ideal; he frequents both public and private spaces of ill-repute. In *London Nights*, he celebrates sexual encounters, as if there were nothing else to write about. Alan Sinfield has suggested that 'decadence ... lingers trembling on the brink of [effeminate versions of] homosexuality.'⁴⁰ But as the majority of discussion in contemporary journals and newspapers suggests, for the 1890s, decadence was as much a matter of a virile, promiscuous, unlicensed male heterosexuality which calls the conventional versions of masculinity into question by displaying explicitly the assumptions which underlay such a category. Moreover, in situating his poetic persona in feminine spaces, Symons produces himself as both hyper-masculine and as aligned with the feminine, since it is only in feminine spaces, like the wings, that his particular version of masculinity can be articulated. It is in the continued reiteration of explicitly hyper-masculine (but not gentlemanly) views that Symons's decadent dissidence — what he called himself his perversity — resides.

Notes

¹ Arthur Symons, 'At the Alhambra: Impressions and Sensations', *The Savoy*, 5 (September, 1896), 75-83, p. 78.

² Arthur Symons, 'At the Alhambra: Impressions and Sensations', p. 79.

³ Richard Le Gallienne, 'Considerations Suggested by Mr. Churton Collins's "Illustrations of Tennyson"', *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, 7 (January, 1892), 77-83, p. 81.

⁴ Arthur Symons, 'At the Alhambra: Impressions and Sensations', p. 75.

⁵ Arthur Symons, *London: A Book of Aspects* (London: W. Collins and Sons Ltd, 1918), p. 173.

⁶ Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* [1957] (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ark Paperbacks, 1986), p. 57, p. 51 (my emphasis).

⁷ Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image*, pp. 56-7, emphasis in original.

⁸ Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image*, p. 71.

⁹ Michel Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression', in Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), p. 33.

¹⁰ Arthur Symons, *London: A Book of Aspects*, p. 169.

¹¹ *London Nights* was first published in 1895 with a second edition (including a preface in response to highly critical reviews) in 1897, both published by Leonard Smithers. All references to *London Nights* in this chapter are taken from Arthur Symons, *The Collected Works*, Volume 1, *Poems* (London: Martin Secker, 1925), and are cited parenthetically in the text as *LN* with a page number to this edition.

¹² Arthur Symons, 'The History of the Moulin Rouge', *English Review*, 32 (1922), 5-12, p. 8.

Symons was probably drawing on work written before his breakdown in 1908 in this piece, but I have been unable to trace any earlier publication of these words.

¹³ In his book *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), Bram Dijkstra comments on the proliferation of paintings of women looking at themselves in mirrors. He makes the point that the reflected woman became the 'single most prominent excuse' for figure paintings in exhibitions towards the end of the century. His commentary on Manet's 1877 painting of Zola's *Nana* is instructive here:

Standing plumply and prominently sideways in the center of this painting, Manet's *Nana* has briefly permitted herself to look away from the oval mirror in which she has been studying herself, as if to give the viewer a casual and only mildly curious glance. The viewer indeed is placed in the role of a gentleman caller, one who is likely to take his own marginal position on the sofa, alongside the top-hatted suitor already seated there, to wait impatiently until *Nana* is through primping and admiring herself and may deign to give them her attention. (pp. 139-40)

Symons's fascination with Jane Avril comes from the fact that she *never* breaks her performance in this way explicitly to acknowledge her audience. She is far more self-contained than *Nana*, and consequently more alluring, though she too, in Symons's poem and in Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings, constructs her viewer as a gentleman caller who waits (in vain) for her attention.

¹⁴ For Max Nordau in *Degeneration*, repeated sound structures were a symptom of artistic derangement. Writing of Verlaine's mode of expression, he notes 'the frequent recurrence of the same word, of the same turn of phrase, that chewing of the cud, or *rabâchage* (repetition), which we have learnt to know as the marks of intellectual debility.' See Nordau, *Degeneration* [1895] (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 124.

¹⁵ Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image*, p. 71.

¹⁶ Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Poster of 'Jane Avril at the Jardin de Paris', 1893.

¹⁷ Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Poster, 'Troupe de Mlle Eglantine', 1896.

¹⁸ Doomed because Avril shared with Symons and Lautrec a propensity to madness. She was hospitalised during periods of insanity at intervals throughout the 1880s and 1890s, and is known to have been a patient at the Salpêtrière under Charcot during the 1880s when he hypnotised her. Indeed, it may even be that her trance-like appearance on stage may have owed something to his treatment. See Julia Frey, *Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994), p. 418.

¹⁹ Arthur Symons, 'At the Alhambra: Impressions and Sensations,' p. 83.

²⁰ Arthur Symons, *Colour Studies in Paris* (London: Chapman and Hall Ltd, 1918), p. 99.

²¹ Arthur Symons, *Colour Studies in Paris*, p. 101.

²² Arthur Symons, *Colour Studies in Paris*, p. 102.

²³ Arthur Symons, 'The History of the Moulin Rouge,' *English Review* 32 (1922), 5-12, p. 9.

²⁴ Deirdre Priddin, *The Art of the Dance in French Literature* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1952), p. 61.

²⁵ Quoted and translated by Deirdre Priddin, *The Art of the Dance in French Literature*, p. 20.

²⁶ Quoted and translated by Deirdre Priddin, *The Art of the Dance in French Literature*, p. 26.

²⁷ Theophile Gautier, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Volume 9 (Geneva, 1978), pp. 415-16, my translation.

²⁸ Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (eds), Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1945), p. 316. Emphasis in original, my translation.

²⁹ Frank Kermode, 'Poet and Dancer Before Diaghilev,' in *Puzzles and Epiphanies: Essays and Reviews, 1958-1961* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 17.

³⁰ Arthur Symons, 'The World as Ballet' [dated 1898] in *Studies in Seven Arts* (London: Archibald Constable and Co., 1906), pp. 388-89.

³¹ Jean Renoir, *Danse à Bougival*, 1882-3, oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

³² Arthur Symons, 'A Prelude to Life' in *Spiritual Adventures* [1905] (London: Constable and Co., 1928), p. 53.

³³ John Lucas argues that 'Nora on the Pavement' articulates 'the unbridgeable gap between poet and dancer' in that the circles that the arts of dancing and poetry each create are unbreakable; and he uses this view to suggest that Symons both knows and accepts the essential unknowability of lives in the city. See John Lucas, 'Hopkins and Symons: Two Views of the City' in John Stokes (ed.), *Fin de Siècle/Fin du Globe: Fears and Fantasies of the Late Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 67. It is my view that the gazes of the dancer and the poet, however, do break the circles, and form a connection between them and their respective arts which is essential to the decadent *frisson* of their various encounters.

³⁴ Anon., 'Pah!', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 2 September, 1895, p. 4; also quoted in Karl Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 118-19. This view can be compared with that of Philip Gilbert Hamerton, writing in the second volume of *The Yellow Book* ('Stella Maris' had first appeared, in volume 1). Hamerton writes: 'I regret the publication of 'Stella Maris' by Mr. Arthur Symons; the choice of the title is in itself offensive. It is taken from one of the most beautiful hymns to the Holy Virgin (Ave, maris stella!), and applied to a London street-walker as a star in the dark sea of urban life. We know that the younger poets make art independent of morals, and certainly the two have no necessary connection: but why should poetic art be employed to celebrate common fornication?' See Philip Gilbert Hamerton, 'The Yellow Book: A Criticism of Volume I', *The Yellow Book*, 2 (1894), p. 181.

³⁵ Arthur Symons, *Images of Good and Evil* (London: William Heinemann, 1899). This poem may owe something to Baudelaire's poem, 'Les Petites Vieilles' (*Les fleurs du mal*, 1857), in which the old women of Paris are described thus:

Ces monstres dislogués furent jadis des femmes,
Éponine ou Laïs! Monstres brisés, bossus
Ou tordus, aimons-les! ce sont encor des âmes ...

See Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1980), pp. 66-68. Symons's description of the old women of London draws on the grotesques which Baudelaire represents, but his is a more humanising aesthetic. Far from seeing the women as mere 'marionettes' he gives them a voice to speak of their own departed glory, so that they are figures of pathos as much as of monstrosity.

³⁶ Nelly Furman, 'The Politics of Language: Beyond the Gender Principle' in Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn (eds), *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1982), p. 61.

³⁷ Arthur Symons, *Poems*, Volume 1 (London: William Heinemann, 1902). This organisation of his early poems is the one adopted for the Martin Secker projected *Collected Works* of 1924. The original 'Prologue' poem was retained, but with a new title, 'Prologue: In the Stalls'; but the subtitle was dropped in the Martin Secker edition.

³⁸ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: the 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1980), p. 189.

³⁹ Pater, ed. Hill, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, p. 189.

⁴⁰ Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (London: Cassell, 1994), p. 93.

Chapter Eight

Vernon Lee: Decadent Woman?

[T]he man and the woman, *vir ac femina*, do not stand opposite one another, he a little taller, she a little rounder, like Adam and Eve on the panels of Memling and Kranach; but in a quite asymmetrical relation; a big man, as in certain archaic statues, holding in his hand a little woman; a god (if we are poetical, and we face the advantages of the case) protecting a human creature; or (if we are cynical and look to the disadvantages) a little human being playing with a doll.¹

The place of male writers like Wilde and Symons in the annals of decadence is secure in as much as decadence is and was defined primarily as an offence against acceptable versions of masculinity. Wilde is a decadent in the 1880s because he offends against manliness in writings which refuse the category of masculine sincerity as the benchmark for critical judgement; and he is a decadent in the 1890s when the matrix of his life and art is rendered explicit by the process of law. Symons, who defined decadence himself, offends implicitly against standards of gentlemanly behaviour, by speaking at length, and repeatedly, of his varied heterosexual encounters. Wilde always writes of heterosexual love as doomed, never consummated; Symons has too many consummations. In this network of decadent meanings, what place does the decadent woman writer occupy? Indeed, is it even possible to conceive of such a figure?

The answers to these questions are bound up in the notion of decadence itself. The contradictions implicit in decadence as a literary term — the unresolved and unresolvable binaries which make up its subject matter and its form — connote both weakness and power in the works and the writers to which and to whom it is applied. As Symons suggests in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, the word was either ‘hurled as a reproach or hurled back as a defiance.’² It is either an insult, or a badge voluntarily and defiantly adopted — used by the one side to deprecate writers and their works, and by the other to identify an exciting new movement. But whichever way it is used, it invokes a standard of normality which decadence undermines. If you are against decadence, the subverted norm is shocking; if you are for it, the shock is deliberate, and is the whole point of the dissidence of decadence.

The duality of decadence therefore both undermines the threat of subversion and confirms its potency. Without a perception of danger, the term would be unnecessary as a term of insult; it is the power of the implied threat to standards of decency and normality that necessitates the abusive response. So the term serves a hostile, aggressive purpose (when it is hurled as a reproach), which paradoxically validates the power of the threat which the insult seeks to dissipate. When the term is an insult, it is used to validate offended normality. But when the term is deliberately adopted, it invokes the norm in order to attack it. The conventions of love poetry, for example, or the conventions of the sincere poetic voice, underlie the poetry of both Wilde and Symonds; and indeed, the effect of their works depends on the evocation and subversion of these conventions (amongst others). The standard which they invoke, and which they subvert, is a standard dependent on the matrix of associations which surround the concept of masculinity.

If masculinity is the norm (and indeed, the ideal), then its linguistic and conceptual opposite, femininity is a marker of deviation and decadence — Wilde was, after all, castigated for first for an effeminacy which undermined the masculine standard of sincerity. The obvious place to look for decadence should therefore be in women artists. Only this is not quite the case. In men, femininity or effeminacy represents a clear departure from the ideal to which men should aspire, or as Alan Sinfield puts it: ‘The root idea is a male falling away from the purposeful reasonableness that is supposed to constitute manliness, into the laxity and weakness conventionally attributed to women. ... The effeminate male is (1) “wrong” and (2) inferior (female).’ But femininity in women is a merely ‘neutral’ category, and a woman offends gender ideology more by aspiring to masculinity, than by conforming to the feminine ideal which is her ‘natural’ lot. The masculine woman, says Sinfield, is ‘(1) “wrong” and (2) impertinent (aspiring to manliness).’³

There is no shortage of women appearing *within* the decadent arts; as Jennifer Birkett has put it, ‘Woman’s place, for the artists and writers of the decadence, was inside the work of art, as an image to fix the male imagination.’⁴ But for the woman

who wishes to write, and indeed who wishes to be taken seriously as a writer, decadence is a more problematic term. Partly because it is so bound up with a masculine persona, and partly because it is so often used as a term of abuse, the woman writer is less likely specifically to align herself with decadent arts, to define herself explicitly as decadent. And where women writers of the nineties were seen as decadent, as we saw in Chapter Three, it was because they were 'New Women' who appeared to be claiming at least social autonomy for themselves (and implicitly sexual autonomy as well), so that the decadent label merely continued the tradition of *ad hominem/ad feminam* criticism of the earlier nineteenth century. So, where a male decadent writer is attacked for being effeminate, a decadent woman writer is attacked for not being feminine enough. As Christine Battersby has argued, masculine is not to feminine what male is to female; there is an asymmetry in the terms of these two sets of oppositions, and the relative values accorded to them alter depending on the context in which they are being used. The feminine traits of a male genius are positive; but the feminine traits of a decadent male artist are negative; and femininity in a woman artist is simultaneously neutral (because 'natural') and an impediment to artistic achievement because art is defined as essentially male.⁵

The writer known as 'Vernon Lee' represents an interesting case study in the attempt to discover the viability of the category 'decadent woman artist.' She is less well-known than either Wilde or Symonds. There has been no sustained attempt to collect or collate her writings, which are scattered through late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century journals; and whilst much of her work was published in book form during her lifetime, the books have been largely out of print for more than half a century.⁶ It may indeed be that the lack of the composite literary identity which scholarship and collected editions confer is responsible for her non-appearance in any literary canon, and for the elusiveness of any critical label for her writing.

On the face of it, she is an ideal candidate for a place in the decadent canon. She was born Violet Paget in 1856 in Florence to British ex-patriate parents. Her father was a shadowy figure, dominated by his wife, and his only real effect on family life is that it

was for the sake of his hunting and fishing that the family lived abroad. Violet was educated mostly at home by her mother, and by her half-brother, Eugene Lee-Hamilton, only child of Mrs Paget's first marriage. Mrs Paget had a rather esoteric attitude to education, believing, for example, that geometry was best taught by word of mouth on daily walks, without reference to diagrams. But she did instil in her daughter a strong sense of grammar as the fundamental principle of good writing, and taught what Vernon Lee was later to identify as good manners and literary good taste by a process of osmosis. She was an old-fashioned woman who clung, 'even in the seventies, to certain eighteenth-century words and pronunciations,'⁷ and, according to Maurice Baring, Vernon Lee shared her mother's delight in archaic language forms.⁸ Whilst she was never sent to school she did benefit from a number of French and German governesses, and she spoke French, German and Italian as well as she spoke English.

Mrs Paget had literary ambitions for her daughter, which bore very early fruit when, at the age of thirteen, Violet published her first piece of fiction, 'Les aventures d'une pièce de monnaie' in a Swiss family magazine. Through her teens, she developed an interest in the arts in eighteenth-century Italy, a subject on which she was acknowledged as an expert when she published her first monograph, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* in 1880, under her newly adopted pseudonym, Vernon Lee, chosen explicitly because masculine authority was desirable for a young woman writer seeking to be taken seriously on aesthetic topics. Once the name had been chosen, Vernon Lee used it as much as possible in her private life as well as in her dealings with publishers.⁹

For most of the time between her early forays into print in the early 1870s until the early 1890s, Vernon Lee lived for three-quarters of the year with her family in whichever foreign watering hole they chose to live in, but she came to England every summer to meet publishers and to keep in touch with the literary life of London. Her family was keen for her to remain with them, in order to minister to the needs of her brother. Lee-Hamilton was a poet who had had some success with his early volumes, but who had (quite deliberately it almost seems) succumbed to an hysterical illness, just

as his career in the diplomatic service was starting to take off.¹⁰ This illness confined him to his bed from whence he exercised a quietly tyrannical influence on his family, directing where they would stay, who would be allowed to visit, and so on. He continued to write, and he used his sister as a social secretary and amanuensis for his work at a time when she was very anxious to get on with her own writing. When Eugene was eventually 'cured' in 1896, brother and sister quarrelled and were never reconciled.

Through the 1880s and 90s, Vernon Lee published a stream of books and articles covering a huge range of material and subjects. She wrote combative, assertive books on philosophy and aesthetics, sometimes written as dialogues in which contradictory points of view were fiercely argued between fictional characters.¹¹ Her theoretical writings reject a narrow morality as a criterion for critical judgement. She reacted, for example, strongly against the writings of Ruskin, arguing that morality and aesthetics were 'separate spheres', and Ruskin's judgements are based only on 'the strange logic of desire', and the 'logical work of falsehood'.¹² Her criticism exhibits a preoccupation with form rather than content, so that she is able to resist morality as a basis for aesthetic theory, and she refuses to construct herself as a passive mirror of an established critical order. Her interest in form led her to collaborate with her closest female friend Clementina (Kit) Anstruther Thomson in writing works on psychological aesthetics,¹³ and she is credited with having introduced the term 'empathy' into English art and literary criticism. And after the turn of the century, she wrote increasingly polemical books on contemporary political questions, in which she argues the case for women's suffrage, and, during the First World War, the case for pacifism. At the same time, she also wrote quite a large body of fiction, mostly in the form of novellas and short stories. These stories make it clear that Vernon Lee was not a New Woman writer, in that they eschew the social commitment which is a feature of writers like Sarah Grand or Mona Caird. There was also one three-volume novel of contemporary life, *Miss Brown* (1884), which was not a great success, and which was partly responsible for a rupture with Henry James, to whom it was dedicated.¹⁴ Lee herself

recognised later that the novel had been a mistake, writing to her brother in August, 1893, on the subject of her lack of general popularity and mass reading public:

Of course, I have played my cards as badly as I could have done with regard to securing a public; ... I could perhaps swing into notice with the right sort of novel. But I feel every day more and more that I don't know enough of life to write a novel I should care to read. Life is too serious to be misrepresented as in *Miss Brown*. I can write bits of stories on the rare occasions of knowing some side of life well. At sixty I will write a novel.¹⁵

She never did write a second novel of contemporary life;¹⁶ but the 'bits of stories' from the 80s, 90s and early years of this century are the works on which her reputation should stand. And these works are also the works on which the definition of the decadent woman artist might be predicated.

Between 1886 and 1904, Vernon Lee published several collections of novellas and short stories which are mostly ghost stories or tales of the supernatural, though there are also satirical social studies of contemporary life, and a variety of historical fictions. All of these fictions are populated by characters who, in their various ways, overtly disrupt the gender norms of the period — masculine women, effeminate men, and quasi-androgynous pre-pubescents — who are all haunted by varieties of impossible desires. As Peter Gunn has argued, her stories are all about love, 'and in none can the experience be regarded as a satisfactory one.'¹⁷ Desire is consistently invoked and consistently disappointed, in the social satires because of human failings, in the ghost stories because desire is disembodied and consummation would be impossible. And it is in this constant disappointment of a desire which cannot be fulfilled, but which remains all-consuming, that one might locate this woman writer's subversion of heterosexuality which is radical, but which is also profoundly decadent. Both Diana Fuss and Terry Castle have argued in different contexts that the figure of the ghost is essential to both to the articulation of, and othering of, the homosexual within culture. As Diana Fuss puts it, in the complex relations between homo- and heterosexuality, 'each is haunted by the other', and a striking feature of lesbian and gay theory is 'the fascination with the specter of abjection, a certain preoccupation with the figure of the homosexual as specter and phantom, as spirit and revenant, as abject and

undead'.¹⁸ And Terry Castle argues that ghosts are part of lesbian literary history because, according to what she calls the 'Queen Victoria principle' of lesbian non-existence, lesbian love is impossible to imagine and to incarnate in real flesh.¹⁹ Moreover, the sense that one is haunted by vampiric phantoms is discussed by Gautier in his definition of Baudelaire's decadence, which admits of supernatural shading (see above, Chapter Two).

This is not, of course, to say that all ghost stories, or tales of the supernatural, are necessarily either lesbian or decadent, nor even that there is any very obvious correlation between lesbian fictions and the decadence of the 1890s, as there appears to be for male homosexuality and decadence.²⁰ But, as Rosemary Jackson has argued, fantasy literature 'exposes a culture's definitions of that which can be: it traces the limits of its epistemological and ontological frame.'²¹ As such, it operates in the same liminal spaces as decadence, moving between the imaginative and the real, between art and life, deliberately blurring and transgressing any line which is erected to separate these terms. Ghost stories and tales of fantasy can, therefore, articulate counter-cultural positions from within a culture by speaking of what is forbidden or taboo, by giving voice to concealed desire. As Freud argues in 'The Uncanny', the uncanny 'is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.'²² The ghost in the ghost story might therefore be seen as a kind of unconscious projection of forbidden desire outwards from the conscious, articulate self.²³

The discussion that follows examines a number of Vernon Lee's short fictions with the idea that these stories resist the consummation of desire, because the only imaginable consummation is an unacceptably heterosexual one. The tales play out the subversion of gender roles, they skirt the borders of transgression, and they take their pleasure, and reproduce that of the reader, in holding out the promise of a resolution in taboo — and then they withhold that promise. There is, that is, a tantalising prolongation of desire which is destined to end — as so many of Symonds's stories do — in disappointment, death or madness.

The first of Lee's successful novellas was 'A Phantom Lover: A Fantastic Story' first published in 1886.²⁴ As with many of the stories, the narrator of this tale is an articulate artist-figure, this time a painter, who is invited to Okehurst House in Kent to paint the current lord and lady of the manor. At first the commission does not interest him; Mr Oke seems a very dull and rather philistine man whose only noticeable feature is a 'maniac frown' — 'a thing which usually means something abnormal' (112). William Oke wants his own portrait and that of his wife to be painted, and the anonymous narrator accepts the commission because he has nothing else to do at that time. He expects it will be dull to live at Okehurst whilst completing the paintings because his impression of William Oke is one of such utter and banal normality that he assumes that the wife will be equally normal — a 'bouncing, well-informed, model house-keeper, electioneering, charity-organising young lady, whom such an individual as Mr. Oke would regard in spirit of a remarkable woman' (114) — a woman, that is who plays the role of bourgeois femininity to perfection. What he finds is rather different.

The painter is stunned to discover that Alice Oke is 'the most graceful and exquisite woman I have ever seen, but with a grace and an exquisiteness that had nothing to do with any preconceived notion or previous experience of what goes by these names' (122). From his description of her, it is clear that she is in no way conventionally beautiful; she is too tall, too thin, has a stoop: her charm defies linguistic analysis, words possessing only a 'wretched abstract meaning, an impotent conventional association' (124). And in the end, he could not represent her adequately since her charm was 'altogether a question of movement', which also defied his artistic conventions of representation with paintbrush or pencil (110). At first the painter thinks that Alice Oke is a kind of conscious flirt, but as time goes on he becomes increasingly convinced that she is merely self-obsessed, with 'an exorbitant interest in herself — a Narcissus attitude — curiously complicated with a fantastic imagination, all turned inwards' (127). The reason for her self-contemplation is her belief that she is the living reincarnation of one of her ancestors, one Alice Pomfret who had married a Nicholas

Oke in the middle of the seventeenth century, a belief which is reinforced by her resemblance to the family portrait of her namesake, a resemblance which she cultivates, apparently deliberately, to annoy her husband, who disapproves of his ancestors' story.

The reason for the disapproval is that Alice and Nicholas were implicated in the murder of a cavalier poet by the name of Christopher Lovelock, who, so legend has it, had become Alice's lover. She, however, apparently ashamed of the lowliness of this connection, or simply out of capriciousness (according to William Oke's telling of the story), conspired with her husband to waylay Lovelock and to kill him — it was Alice who fired the fatal shot. The present-day Alice Oke looks back on the past with something bordering on obsession. She insists on preserving Lovelock's writings; and she dresses as far as possible in the manner of a seventeenth-century lady, as if she is almost deliberately setting out to madden her husband. Despite his distaste for the subject, she brings it up at every opportunity, until William Oke begins to be haunted by the story, and perhaps by the ghost of Christopher Lovelock himself, and he is eventually maddened by jealousy. With the painter as his unwilling witness, he bursts in on his wife, swearing that Lovelock is with her (though the painter can see no-one). Thinking to shoot the ghost, he shoots his wife and 'a pool of red blood' forms on her dress (which is the dress that the first Alice Oke wore as a wedding gown). And then he shoots himself. A locket is found on Alice Oke's body which contains a lock of hair which does not come from her husband. The narrator is 'quite sure it was Lovelock's' (191).

This story has many of the conventional attributes of the ghost story. The artist-figure, for example, narrates it as an eyewitness account to a visitor in his studio, claiming for his narrative the authenticity of 'I was there.' There is also the element of uncertainty in what is reported, in that there is the hint of William Oke's madness — his maniac frown — which unsettles the possibility of reading the story as a simple factual account of a 'real' ghost. Added to these elements, however, there is also a drama of gender in the marriage of Alice and William Oke. William is a conspicuously masculine man who belongs in absolute terms to the ruling classes — a landlord, a magistrate, a

hunting and fishing man, who had been a soldier before his marriage. He appears to be the perfect figure of the Victorian *paterfamilias*, and the artist expects that his wife will mirror him, and that they will have 'five or six little Okes — that man certainly must have at least five children' (114). It would appear, however, that the Oke's marriage has no physical expression. There are no children. Moreover, since his marriage, Mr. Oke has given up the sporting life (117), as if his relationship with his wife has sapped his manly energies. Alice Oke, who is exquisite and strange, owes much in her conception to the Mona Lisa, for she too has a mysterious smile, and seems vampiric or fatal in her relationship with her husband:

I see her so plainly, walking slowly up and down a room, ... the head, with the hair cropped in short pale curls, always drooping a little, except when she would suddenly throw it back, and smile, not at me, nor at anyone, nor at anything that had been said, but as if she alone had suddenly seen or heard something, with the strange dimple in her thin, pale cheeks, and the strange whiteness in her full, wide-opened eyes. (123)

She is, that is, in those moments, an image of madness, which mirrors her husband's 'maniac frown.' In the battle between husband and wife, he becomes less masculine, and she less feminine, in the sense that she continually asserts herself through her insistence on the truth of the Lovelock story, despite her husband's distaste. He cannot control her; and finally, he cannot control himself, though it is a moot point as to whether she has driven him mad, or whether he really is haunted by the ghosts of the past.

In the climactic murder scene, when William Oke kills his wife, the perverse relationship between desire and death is dramatised in the soaking of a wedding gown in blood. The first Alice Oke, according to the contemporary Alice Oke, had killed her lover because 'she had loved him more than the whole world!' (153) His death was the only means to her total possession of him. What the contemporary Alice Oke seems to desire, then, is that someone — her rather dull, provincial husband who is scarcely fitted for the role of the passionate lover — should love her with that same intensity, with a love which is only fulfilled in death, since death is the only consummation she can imagine for desire. Hence, the profoundly sexualised image of her bloodied

wedding dress, perverse metonym of both death and consummated desire. In this story, as in many others, Vernon Lee refuses to incarnate desire, or to imagine its fulfilment in bodily terms.

The reviewer for the *Athenaeum* of the second publication of this story in *Hauntings* suggests that Lee's central character was usually a 'lure woman' or *femme fatale*, who draws her lovers to death or madness.²⁵ Even where the lure is not specifically female, however, as in 'A Wicked Voice', it has feminine qualities. This story narrates how a Norwegian composer who writes music in a Wagnerian manner, is haunted whilst holidaying in Venice by a mysterious voice whose power he finds compelling and repugnant. What he dislikes about the human voice in general is that it blurs the line between humanity and art, much as Symonds's figure of the dancer does: it depends on the flesh for its production, but is itself incarnate and intangible. He rails against those who praise him for his musical return to the 'supremacy of melody and the respect of the human voice.'

O cursed human voice, violin of flesh and blood, fashioned with the subtle tools, the cunning hands, of Satan! O execrable art of singing, have you not wrought mischief enough in the past ... Is it not enough to have dishonoured a whole century in idolatry of that wicked and contemptible wretch the singer, without persecuting an obscure young composer of our days, whose only wealth is his love of nobility in art, and perhaps some few grains of genius? (127)²⁶

As a composer, that is, he resents the impossibility of separating the singer from the song. His punishment for this wilful disgust with the human voice — for his intention to refuse to be affected by the power of the voice — is to be haunted by strange singing in Venice, the ghostly voice of an eighteenth-century *castrato* named Zaffirino.

His obsession with Zaffirino begins when he comes across an engraving portrait of the singer, an image which compels his attention and his disgust:

That effeminate fat face of his is almost beautiful, with an odd smile, brazen and cruel. I have seen faces like this, if not in real life, at least in my boyish romantic dreams, when I read Swinburne and Baudelaire, the faces of wicked, vindictive women. Oh yes! he is decidedly a beautiful creature, this Zaffirino, and his voice must have had the same sort of beauty and the same expression of wickedness. ... (135, ellipsis in original)

He learns more of the story of the singer from an old Italian count, who claims that Zaffirino's voice had killed his great aunt. The singer's boast was that no woman could resist his singing. His first song 'could make any woman turn pale and lower her eyes, the second make her madly in love, while the third song could kill her off on the spot, kill her for love, there under his very eyes, if he felt inclined' (132). The Count's aunt had scorned this boast, and then, having heard his voice, she had begun to pine away. Her family, as she lay dying, had brought the singer to her bedchamber, where he had sung three songs. After the first, she began to revive, and after the second, she appeared quite cured. But with the third song, she fell back down dead.

Once he has contemptuously heard the story, the composer begins to be haunted by a voice coming to him across the Venetian waters, and it drives away all his inspiration for his Norse opera, to be called 'Ogier the Dane.' He is not the only person who hears the voice, and other people are fascinated by it, though they cannot even decide whether it is a man or woman's voice; it is 'a man's voice which had much of a woman's, but more even of a chorister's, but a chorister's voice without its limpidity and innocence' (144-5). The composer tries to forget the voice, but he begins to hear it everywhere, even when others do not hear it, and when he is working on his own opera, he finds himself writing 'scraps of forgotten eighteenth-century airs' which are completely inappropriate to his project. Eventually, he consults a doctor, and is prescribed rest in the country.

The composer goes to a villa at the invitation of the old count, but only realises when it is too late, that this is the very villa in which the count's great aunt had been sung to death by Zaffirino. The voice gets even louder there, seeming to come from one of the rooms in the old house, and its sensuousness provokes a strong bodily response in the composer, such that he feels he is about to disappear: 'I felt my body melt even as wax in the sunshine, and it seemed to me that I too was turning fluid and vaporous, in order to mingle with these sounds as the moonbeams mingled with the dew.'²⁷ In order to prevent his total dissolution in the music of the voice, he tries to stop the singing by tracking it down, and stopping Zaffirino from completing a particular *cadenza* phrase: 'I

understood ... that his singing *must* be cut short, that the accursed phrase *must* never be finished. I understood that I was before an assassin, that he was killing ... me... with his wicked voice' (156, emphasis in original).

He succeeds in stopping the voice by bursting violently into the room where the singing is taking place; but in his terror at having come face to face with the ghost of the singer, he runs out into the night, despite the fact that he has been warned against the fevers which inhabit the marshy land around the villa after sundown. He gets a fever which nearly kills him. But although he recovers his bodily health, he is ever after unable to compose because Zaffirino's voice now haunts him from within:

I live the life of other living creatures. But I am wasted by a strange and deadly disease. I can never lay hold of my inspiration. My head is filled with music which is certainly by me, since I have never heard it before, but which still is not my own, which I despise and abhor: little trippings, flourishes and languishing phrases, and long-drawn, echoing cadences. (158)

This, then, is a story of perverse seduction in which sex, sexuality and gender all have their part to play. The transgressions take place in several locations. The singer himself, a castrated man who therefore has a womanly voice, attracts women, but both creates and thwarts their desire which he cannot fulfil, except through bringing them to a climax (in the singing of the *cadenza*) in death. In his eighteenth-century incarnation, he only attracts women. But the contemporary composer is a *man*, a man who is at once attracted to and repelled by the effeminacy of the *castrato*. He recognises the fatality of any desire of man for man; and yet he cannot escape the clutches of that desire, except by acquiescing to the death implied by the completion of the singer's *cadenza*, a completion which would — if were allowed to happen — stand in for a perverse physical consummation. His resistance, however, cannot cure him. The composer is, in a manner of speaking, also castrated by his encounter with the *castrato*, since he can no longer compose, and his masculine function in the world, defined by his public role as a composer, is taken away from him. At the end of the story, he remains haunted by an insatiable and unachievable desire to hear the voice of Zaffirino once again, and, implicitly, to die into consummation. His earlier fear of a bodily

response to the 'nobility of art' is transformed into a continued sense of heightened desire. He is trapped into a liminal space between artistic and physical satisfaction.

Like 'A Wicked Voice,' 'Amour Dure: Passages from the Diary of Spiridion Trepka' is also set in Italy, with its implications of unEnglish and unmanly eroticism and exoticism, though this time the ghost is a Lucrezia Borgia figure from the Italian Renaissance.²⁸ Spiridion Trepka is a Polish academic, researching the history of Urbania in the Vatican library. Whilst there, he starts to become obsessed with a sixteenth-century duchess named Medea da Carpi, whose miniature he has found apparently by accident, whilst he was looking for something else, though the story hints that his obsession with her predates his arrival in Rome, and there is a suggestion that there is some fatal flaw in his own character which predestines him to be haunted by her (8). He presents himself as a man committed to dry academic study, whilst at the same time he is disappointed that he cannot really get in touch with the past through his researches. When he finds Medea's portrait, however, he becomes obsessed with tracing her story, and the past begins to live in the present, and Medea's ghost begins to haunt him, and to dominate all his research.

Medea's story is one of ruthless ambition which is achieved by murder. As a child, she is betrothed to a neighbouring duke, but does not want to marry him; when he tries to take her by force as she achieves maturity at the age of fifteen, she stabs him to death. She then marries her second duke, who, two years later is stabbed by one of his grooms. Before the groom is himself killed by some of Medea's attendants, he swears that he had committed the crime on the promise of her love for him. There is outrage at the second violent death of one of Medea's husbands, and she has to flee the country; she throws herself on the mercy of the Duke of Urbania, a married, but childless ruler, who believes her story of innocence. Medea then insinuates herself into her third duke's affections, and gets rid of his wife by spreading scandal about her. The duchess retires to a convent where she pines away, and Medea marries her third duke.

The Duke of Urbania is older than the first two husbands, and he dies — though there is a strong hint that he might have been helped on his way by Medea who

wished to ensure that her son by her second marriage would inherit the dukedom. Her son is proclaimed duke, and she becomes the regent of the province, and rules apparently with great cruelty, and with such arrogance that there are constant wars with neighbouring provinces. Finally, Medea is defeated in battle by one ex-Cardinal Robert, who takes over the dukedom. He does not have Medea put to death, but he refuses ever to see her, fearing her amazing beauty. But when Medea starts to plot against him, he has her secretly strangled — the assassins are women who have murdered their own children so that they will not be swayed by Medea's clearly ferocious powers of attraction over men. Indeed, his fear of her power over men is so great that he does not even allow a priest to go near her, and she dies unshriven. 'Such is the story of Medea da Carpi ... She was put to death ... in December, 1582, at the age of barely seven-and-twenty, and having, in the course of her short life, brought to a violent end five of her lovers' (16).

Spiridion Trepka, having seen the portrait of Medea da Carpi, become obsessed with her fatally attractive vampire looks:

The face is a perfect oval, ... the eyes grey, large, prominent, beneath exquisitely curved brows and lids just a little too tight at the corners; the mouth, also, brilliantly red and most delicately designed, is a little too tight, the lips strained a trifle over the teeth. Tight eyelids and tight lips give a strange refinement, and, at the same time, an air of mystery, a somewhat sinister seductiveness; they seem to take, but not to give. The mouth with a kind of childish pout, looks as if it could bite or suck like a leech. (17)

He starts to research about her, whilst pretending that he is doing what he has really come to Rome for. He discovers, accidentally again, that Duke Robert, when he had his statue made, had had placed in it a silver statuette of his familiar genius or soul, with the intention that this would enable him to rest in peace until the day of judgement, and he is baffled by this information which seems inordinately superstitious for a former priest. But then, as his diary progresses, he stops even pretending that he is working on historical research, and allows the image of Medea to dominate his thoughts. Her influence over him causes him to lose all sense of perspective and academic judgement when he thinks of her story: 'we must put aside all pedantic modern ideas of right and wrong. Right and wrong in a century of violence and treachery does not exist, least of

all for creatures like Medea. Go preach right and wrong to a tigress, my dear sir!’ (20) And he concludes that she was neither cruel nor immoral, but merely that she was magnificent, and deserved the tribute of death which various people paid for her.

The possession of a woman like Medea is a happiness too great for a mortal man; it would turn his head, make him forget even what he owed her; no man must survive long who conceives himself to have a right over her; it is a kind of sacrilege. And only death, the willingness to pay for such happiness by death, can at all make a man worthy of being her lover; he must be willing to love and suffer and die. (22)

This he sees is the meaning of her heraldic motto which reads ‘Amour dure, dure Amour’ — love which lasts, cruel love.

After many months of nurturing his obsession, Trepka receives a letter, apparently written in Medea’s hand, on antique paper and with ancient ink, which invites him to a tryst at an old, derelict church, which he later discovers has been abandoned for more than a century. He goes there at the appointed time, and finds a service in progress, though the people at the Mass seem to be dressed in very odd clothes; and there he sees the apparition of Medea herself, who beckons him to follow her, but never lets him reach her. When he leaves the church in pursuit of the phantom, she has disappeared. He goes to the church twice more, with the same result, and by the third occasion he believes — though Medea has never spoken to him — that he has been promised her love. After this third meeting, when he returns home, he finds another letter from Medea, giving him instructions to break open Duke Robert’s statue, and to destroy the silver statuette that is in it. As a reward for his obedience, ‘she whom thou lovest will come to reward thy fidelity’ (42).

Trepka is under no illusions as to the fatality of his love for Medea. ‘The love of such a woman is enough, and is fatal —’ he says: ‘I shall die also.’ (44) But he goes to meet death anyway, buying a hatchet and an axe, and making his way to Duke Robert’s statue. On the way, he meets three apparently lost souls who try to prevent him from fulfilling his quest, not out of concern for his fate, but because they are jealous of him, so Trepka thinks. His diary describes his mutilation of the statue and

his return home to await Medea's coming. Her footstep is heard on the stair, and then the diary breaks off, and the story ends with a note.

Here ends the diary of the late Spiridion Trepka. The chief newspapers of the province ... informed the public that on Christmas morning of the year 1885, the bronze equestrian statue of Robert II had been found grievously mutilated; and that Professor Spiridion Trepka ... had been discovered dead of a stab in the region of the heart, given by an unknown hand. (47)

Once again, desire is fatal and perverse. The *femme fatale*, who presumably wielded the knife, takes on the characteristics of the phallic castrating woman. The intelligent academic male forgets the logic of his work, and becomes passive in the face of the woman's power: moreover, he consents to his own passivity — consents to die. He describes himself early in the story as a man who has no desire for contemporary women. Modern Italian women are hopelessly degenerate. And as for Germans, they are depressingly bourgeois and down to earth. Trepka seeks impossible desires:

I am wedded to history, to the Past, to women like Lucrezia Borgia, Vittoria Accoramboni, or that Medea da Carpi ... some day I shall perhaps find a grand passion, a woman to play the Don Quixote about, ... a woman out of whose slipper to drink, and for whose pleasure to die; but not here! (22)

His desire for the great powerful and murderous women of the past is, of course, masochistic, a will once more towards annihilation, and towards death as the only imaginable consummation. The perverted (she is described as witchlike) feminine power of Medea makes him forget masculine common-sense and he gives into a decadent loss of academic, historical and moral perspectives. His desire at once asserts and destroys his masculinity: he is an historian who has become obsessed with a fabulous tale which disrupts his sense of who he is: 'Am I turning novelist instead of historian?' he asks himself (22). The price of becoming involved in a grand passion with history is that he too can be snuffed out like a character in mere fiction. But Trepka is decadent in his defiance of the consequences of his actions — he prefers to die in the hope of his single moment of ecstasy, which is also the moment of death.

In a slightly later story 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' (1896), the matrix of associations around desire, sex, gender, sexuality, and the art versus life dialectic are played out in more detail.²⁹ This story, says Burdett Gardner, 'in its unwholesome

weirdness [is] a specimen of the writing which brought the reproach of “decadence” on *The Yellow Book*,³⁰ though it might rather be the case that publishing in *The Yellow Book*, particularly after the Wilde trials of 1895 might be evidence of a more deliberate allegiance with decadence on the part of the writer.³¹

The story opens with an appeal to history intended to signify the story’s authenticity:

In the year 1701, the Duchy of Luna became united to the Italian dominions of the Holy Roman Empire, owing to the extinction of its famous ducal house in the persons of Duke Balthasar Maria and of his grandson Alberic, who should have been the third of the name. Under this dry historical fact lies hidden the strange story of Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady. (289)

The date is significant in several ways. It is the first year of the new century, so that the demise of the house of Luna is a manifestation of its *fin-de-siècle* exhaustion. History moreover provides one of the frames through which the story is told: it is at once a matter of ‘fact’, and a matter of distance on events which have long since passed. It is history which might be expected to provide the normative overview through which a sense of perspective can be maintained, though Spiridion Trepka was also an historian, and his view of the world is anything but ‘normal’. In this case, however, the history is also a fiction — that is, a so-called factual account of a place which never existed — so the touchstone of normality is always already subject to distortion. If the Duchy of Luna never existed, then the date of its demise is necessarily an apocryphal interpolation into the narrative of history.

The story narrates the isolated childhood of the young Prince Alberic in the Red Palace of Luna. The child has no companions and is kept away from court life to flatter the vanity of his grandfather, who has no wish to be reminded that he is old enough to have a grandson. Alberic is therefore thrown back onto his own imaginative resources, living vicariously through the scenes of a tapestry in his apartment. The tapestry depicts the topography, flora and fauna of the dukedom, but it also represents a scene from family history — the relationship between Prince Alberic the Blond, and Oriana the Snake Lady. Young Prince Alberic is never given the details of the story, but he takes considerable aesthetic pleasure from the image of his ancestor’s lady love, a lamia-like

creature, half woman, half snake. So enamoured is he of the tapestry that when his grandfather orders its removal to make way for a new hanging (of Susannah and the Elders), the eleven-year old prince mutilates the new tapestry with a stolen kitchen knife, as if he is resisting the view of the Judaeo-Christian (and adult male) view of the world in favour of the fairy-tale fantasy world of his childhood, a childhood in which he remains powerless, but also free from moralities imposed from the outside. For this heinous crime Alberic is exiled to the ruined Castle of the Sparkling Waters in a distant province of the dukedom.

In his new home, Alberic discovers the real existence of the landscape depicted in the old tapestry; he is happier in his exile than he had ever been at court. Early in his stay at the Castle, Alberic is befriended by a tame grass snake, and by a beautiful woman who claims to be his godmother, and who appears each evening for half an hour at sunset, bearing gifts, and teaching Alberic the rudiments of rule and princely good conduct. She always insists, however, that her visits be kept secret.

Time passes, and Alberic grows up. He eventually discovers the full story behind the tapestry from a travelling tinker, and makes the connection between his so-called godmother and the pet snake. It appears that two of his ancestors, both named Alberic, had failed in their quest to release a beautiful lady from an evil snake charm; the antidote to the spell is that a prince named Alberic must remain faithful to her for ten years. The first Alberic had failed because he had succumbed to more immediate pleasures of the flesh; the second Alberic gave in to the arguments of the church. The present Alberic immediately decides to take up the challenge himself, and to make his 'godmother' into his beloved. His continued disgrace and exile seem to offer some kind of guarantee that, this time, the lady Oriana will be permanently restored to her proper shape.

Unfortunately, Duke Balthasar, short of money to continue ruling in extravagant style to which he had become accustomed, remembers his grandson's existence as a marketable commodity, and decides to marry him off to the first-coming wealthy princess in order to get his hands on her dowry. Alberic is therefore recalled to the Red

Palace, where he steadfastly refuses to marry anyone despite the privations of a virtual imprisonment as his grandfather gets increasingly desperate. The crisis of the story comes when the Duke visits his grandson in the cell where he is now a prisoner, in a final attempt to persuade or bully him into an advantageous match. During a scuffle in this battle of wills, the pet snake is killed. The servants who come to take away its body discover not a snake but a mutilated female form. Alberic pines away and dies for love of the lady, and his grandfather dies soon after. The story then returns to the point of its origin: the 'dry historical fact' of the extinction of the Duchy of Luna.

The story begins with the normative narrative of history; it then journeys through exotic realms of fantasy before re-instituting the normative value of history. This matter-of-fact description would seem to suggest a fiction which asserts and validates one term of the binary opposition over the other, privileging 'dry historical fact' over fantastic story, the 'real' over the overtly fictive, celebrating the defeat of an aberrant phallic female power by the masculine force of history. The Duchy itself, allied linguistically through its name, Luna, to the feminine principle of the moon, is obliterated by the combined masculine forces of earthly power. Indeed, Alberic's original disgrace is initiated by the gift of the tapestry of Susannah and the Elders from Louis XIV, the Sun King. Louis's brief appearance in the story, as well as the annexation of the Duchy by the Holy Roman Empire, because both King and Empire existed in 'real' history, suggest a return to the real, to the norm. The masculine force of structured history defeats the feminine anarchy of No-place, No-time.

This quasi-Structuralist reading which makes the story return to the mean implies the revalidation of an offended standard of morality. And if this were all that the story suggested, there would be no possible decadent allegiance to be gleaned from its structures. What such a reading does not take into account, however, is that the destruction of the fantasy world, according to the value system of the story, is a tragic outcome. Though we know from the outset that the tapestry world will not survive, we are constantly invited to hope otherwise because the story resists the implications of binary oppositions and validates the liminal space of between. The Duchy itself has a

liminal geography: it was once on the map, but no-one can say precisely where it was. And Oriana is a very attractive figure, who is also a liminal inhabitant of a liminal space. She exists halfway between woman and snake; and she appears as a woman only in the liminal time of the half-hour of sunset. Alberic himself, certainly at the outset of the story, is an ungendered pre-pubescent child, on the cusp between childhood and an initiation into the meaning of masculinity. His destruction of the tapestry of Susannah and the Elders is his first almost adult act of self-assertion (which he commits with a stolen knife, a phallic object which he is, as yet, forbidden to possess in his own right). As he grows into manhood under the feminine influence of the snake lady, he decides to take on the quest to restore her to her rightful shape — a quest which, on the face of it, is a return to the norm. But the standards of normality in Luna — of Church, State, History — take no account of the quest. The Duke, who represents the State, does not believe in the story of the tapestry; the church, in the shape of a passing priest, tells Alberic that such a quest is ‘a disagreeable thing, besides being a mortal sin’ (323). And the dry historical facts take no account of it at all. So, in taking on the quest, Alberic resists the norm and its implicit injunction to ignore the hybrid (and therefore perverse) snake/woman form of Oriana.

The code of the tapestry world, as Alberic sees it, is autonomous. Within its frame, there is no question of the moral basis of the quest. The story’s tragic outcome is the result of conflicting levels of perspective within the fiction: the perspective of history, which frames the story; that of the Red Palace which frames the tapestry; and that of the tapestry world itself. History, that is, contains the other two levels of narrative. We do not, however, accept the largest frame as the benchmark for normality; the dryness of historical fact contrasts unfavourably with fertility of the imaginary Castle of the Sparkling Waters. The narrative guides us rather to accept the code which is at furthest remove from the norm or the ‘real’. History is dry: and the Red Palace is sinister (Alberic ‘had always abominated the brilliant tomato-coloured plaster which gave the palace its name,’ had always found the statues built into the palace walls ‘uncanny’, and loathed the grotto which his grandfather had built to his own glory

[296]); the tapestry world is without doubt the most attractive of the three narrative frames. The reader's perspective on the story is that the tapestry world is a more valid principle of normality than the forces which defeat it. The perspective offered by history, the impartial overview, is cold and unappealing. The small, self-contained world of the tapestry represents therefore a legitimate distortion of the overview. The tapestry presents in a small scale the whole of the Duchy, its geography and history. The due sense of proportion usually claimed by history is here reassigned to the part rather than to the whole — a distortion of perspective which might define the decadent position, and which confirms and celebrates the power of the Other.

The most significant aspect of the story for the understanding of the matrix of gender and decadence, however, is the appearance of the snake lady. There is no shortage of sources for this aberrant depiction of woman and phallus conflated; and usually such depictions are meant to be understood as unequivocally evil. The apocryphal Lilith of Jewish mythology is perhaps the first example. As Adam's first wife, she insisted that the sexes had been created equal, and refused to lie beneath him. Adam appealed to God for a more pliant wife, and Lilith was driven from the Garden, only to return in the form of the snake which tempted Eve. Thus the assertive woman who takes on masculine power is recreated as a monstrous phallic animal. The Jewish myth also insists on Lilith's unnaturalness, and after the Fall of Man, she becomes a demonic spirit which preys on small children, as, it is implied, only the most unnatural woman could do: feminine disobedience and assertiveness are perverse. Or again, Cleopatra's association with the snake which kills her is often depicted as just one more symptom of her exotic (and erotic) wickedness.³² There were also other more recent examples to hand, including Keats's *Lamia*, or Rossetti's representation of Lilith in 'Eden Bower.' And in 1895, George MacDonald published his own version of the snake/woman myth in *Lilith*, in which a vampiric snake/panther woman suffers a complete defeat in a metaphysical landscape, a defeat which is sanctioned by all the forces of good, including God himself.

Given this dishonourable cast of foremothers, it comes as something of a surprise to find that Lee's Snake Lady is supposed to be seen as good, though she partakes, of course, of some of the erotic *frisson* engendered by previous incarnations of the relationship between woman and snake. But our perspective on the story is that of the innocent, inexperienced prince Alberic, a child who has never seen in reality so much as a domestic pet. When he discovers that the lady in the tapestry is a snake from the waist down — a discovery which he makes, significantly, because a crucifix is moved during spring-cleaning in the palace — he is not horrified by her grotesque form; indeed he does not even recognise it as grotesque: 'he loved the lady with the thread of gold in her hair only the more *because* she ended off in the long twisting body of a snake' (294-5, my emphasis).

The journey to experience which Alberic makes is to the discovery that he belongs to the world of the tapestry: 'It had been his whole world, and now it had gone, he discovered that he had no other' (294). Only for those who live by other codes, outside the frame of the tapestry, is the serpent's tail a matter either for disbelief — the Duke does not believe in the Snake Lady — or for superstitious horror: 'Holy Virgin!' cries Alberic's nurse. 'She's a serpent' (294). The ending of the quest in the mutilation of the lady is a tragedy because it is narrated by the standard of the tapestry. The prince and his changeling paramour are actually the only human characters in the story. The Duke is more like the statues he erects to his own glory; he bears no relation to his grandson, and in the young Alberic's mind he is an 'uncanny' figure, confused with the lay figures who keep his clothes and wigs neat — he is more of a marionette than a human being, keeping his facade of youth with grotesque applications of rouge. The Duke's counsellors are also grotesques, either physically or morally: a Jesuit, a Jester and a Dwarf. So the defeat of Oriana and Alberic is a defeat of good by evil in a reversal of conventional wisdom and morality: once again, desire is defeated by death, and achieves no consummation. But in this case, the (perverse) desire is tragically defeated because the institutions of power which bring about death are bad, and the hybrid phallic female, who momentarily disrupts that power, is good.

There are many things we do not know about Vernon Lee. Her sexuality is mysterious, a subject for speculation rather than any certainty. And in her many works of fiction and criticism, she does not state a position about the meaning of the word 'decadent' for herself. The stories discussed here do not prove that she would have welcomed the decadent label as applied to her own writing; nor, despite the consistent provocation and thwarting of desire in these stories of ghostly visitations and fantasy, and the preponderance of characters who disrupt gender norms in her writings, can we say with any certainty that these are lesbian fictions: the most we can say is that they might inhabit some space on a continuum of lesbian fiction. Nonetheless, the assertive *femmes fatales* and unmanly men who populate her works are the figures of decadent fiction, and the figures defined as decadent by both hostile and friendly contemporary commentators. Had these short stories been written by almost any male writer of the nineties, no matter how marginally connected with the Rhymers' Club or *The Yellow Book*, they would certainly be cited as evidence of a decadent classification. Her models and her modes of writing are remarkably similar to those chosen by her decadent male fellow artists. So: why was Vernon Lee not seen as decadent in the 1890s? And why does the label matter in the 1990s?

The answer to the question of why the decadent woman artist in general is a scarcely imaginable term has to do with the position of the woman writer in a male-dominated society. Given what Gilbert and Gubar describe as 'the patriarchal authority of art',³³ the position of the woman writer is always already marginal, and there is no need to refine the insult by a further appeal to the masculine standards of normality and ideality. Indeed to hurl the insult of decadence at the woman writer, quite apart from being an ungentlemanly thing to do, would be to accord her more power and attention than is strictly necessary. It would validate her claim for critical notice. Perhaps the masculine or assertive woman is to be feared less than the effeminate man, both because the woman is trying to attain a male-defined norm, and because, in her feminine weakness, she will never actually attain it. If decadence as a label connotes a

disapproval of male effeminacy and weakness, however, it also connotes power and a fear of that power. The relative invisibility of female decadence then operates as a function of male definitions of femininity, in which weakness is an attractive feminine principle, and strength is a female impossibility. If those definitions hold true, then it is a contradiction in terms to speak of the decadent creatrix.

There is, however, another issue which may be also responsible for Vernon Lee's non-appearance in any 'canon' of decadence, which has to do with the particularities (and even peculiarities) of her life, both as it was lived in actuality, and as it was to be intuited from the texts she wrote. In earlier chapters, the discussion focused on the visibility of the male artistic persona, which was used, for example, as a benchmark of critical judgement: a good, upstanding, sincere man could not write a bad text; if the text was read as immoral or insincere, it was taken also as a barometer of the writer's personality. One of the elements in the writings of Wilde and Symonds, and in their definition as decadent, is that they were both very visible public figures who courted the identification of the writer with his text. And the personality of the decadent artist — which is an essential part of the make-up of decadence — is almost always defined as male.

Although Vernon Lee was relatively well-known in literary circles at the end of the nineteenth century, she was far less known to a wider public audience, to whom, as a woman, and particularly a woman living mostly abroad, she had rather less access. In the 1880s and 1890s, although she wrote very polemical articles about aesthetics, she did not discuss other more contentious issues publicly. And by the time her writings on politics were published in the early twentieth century, the vogue for the label of decadence had passed. Her appearance, in mannish tailored suits with cropped hair, was not extreme for the time: but nor was it much in evidence, since Lee lived for much of the year abroad, and stayed with a relatively small set of friends when she was in England. Nor did she court scandal. Burdett Gardner might be adamant that she had a lesbian affair with her friend Mary Robinson, later Mme Duclaux.³⁴ But even if it's true, it's clear that almost no-one knew about it. What's missing from Vernon Lee, that

is, in the matrix of associations surrounding decadence is a distinctively decadent personality — the playing out of decadence in her life as a performance of her textual concerns. If her writings have decadent elements, the figure of the writer did not play the part of the decadent woman.

Does it matter that women and decadence do not appear to go together? Why court such a label, with its slightly queasy associations, after all? Because, as I have argued, decadence is a label which implies hostility on the one hand, and power on the other. For the nineteenth-century decadent, the word resided with male writers because it was defined primarily as an offence against masculine standards of ideality and normality; and such a definition leaves no space for a woman writer to draw on the power implied by the label. For the twentieth-century reader, the nineteenth-century's terms of definition for decadence are ripe for re-assessment — the boundaries invite new transgressions.

Notes

¹ Vernon Lee, 'The Economic Parasitism of Women' in *Gospels of Anarchy* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908), pp. 270-271.

² Arthur Symonds, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: William Heinemann, 1899), p. 8.

³ Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (London: Cassell, 1994), p. 26.

⁴ Jennifer Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers: Decadence in France, 1880-1920* (London and New York: Quartet, 1986), p. 159.

⁵ Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: The Women's Press, 1989), p. 3.

⁶ There are exceptions. The Garland Press included *Miss Brown*, Lee's 1881 novel, in its series of lost texts from the 1880s and 1890s; and a collection of her short stories, *Supernatural Tales*, edited by her friend Irene Cooper Willis in 1956, is still in print (London: Peter Owen) (though it does not preserve the original ordering of the collections of short stories which Lee published in her own lifetime, but is a kind of 'greatest hits' volume). One or two of her other stories appear in anthologies of ghost stories; and her satirical novella, 'Lady Tal' (1896) is reprinted by Elaine Showalter in *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 1993).

⁷ Vernon Lee narrates her mother's educational attitudes in *The Handling of Words and Other Studies in Literary Psychology* (London: John Lane at the Bodley Head, 1923), pp. 297-301; p. 297.

⁸ Baring wrote of Vernon Lee: 'She speaks French like a Frenchwoman of the seventeenth century, so a Frenchman once said to me.' And her English is littered with archaisms of grammar and vocabulary. See Maurice Baring, *Lost Lectures* (1932), quoted in Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 136.

⁹ She had decided to write under a pseudonym in the late 1870s, when her first articles on aesthetics were being published in *Fraser's Magazine*, though her anonymity was not preserved for long. In a letter to a family friend in December, 1878, she wrote: 'It has been found out (Heaven knows how) that

Vernon Lee is not a real name and [*The Academy*] puts it in inverted commas. I don't care that Vernon Lee should be known to be myself, or any young woman, as I am sure no-one reads a woman's writing on art history or aesthetics with anything but mitigated contempt.' See Irene Cooper Willis, *Vernon Lee's Letters* (London: privately printed, 1937), p. 59. Despite her preference for being known as Vernon Lee, Mrs Paget always used her daughter's real name, as did Walter Pater in his letters about her work, as well as those which were more personal, about her visits to him and his sisters in Oxford in the early 1880s. See Lawrence Evans (ed.), *The Letters of Walter Pater* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 50, 53-4, 56, 69-70. For a discussion of the woman writer's adoption of male pseudonyms in the nineteenth century see Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (London: Virago, 1979).

¹⁰ Burdett Gardner reads Lee-Hamilton's hysteria as having been induced by the possibility of a posting to South America which would have meant that the young man would have been separated from his family, and particularly his mother, for two or three years. Whilst the effects of the illness were genuine, its cause was psychosomatic. See Burdett Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination (Victorian Style): A Psychological and Critical Study of 'Vernon Lee'* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1987), p. 85.

¹¹ The philosophical books on aesthetics, written as a kind of homage to Walter Pater, include: *Euphoriion* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1884); *Juvenilia: Being a Second Series of Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887); *Renaissance Fancies and Studies: A sequel to "Euphoriion"* (London: Smith Elder, 1895); and *Limbo and Other Essays* (London: Grant Richards, 1897). These texts represent a course in applied Pater. Lee takes the Pater of *The Renaissance* very seriously, and uses his ideas as they might be applied to a range of periods, art forms and specific artists. The books which are couched as dialogues, in particular *Baldwin: Being Dialogues on Views and Aspirations* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1886) and *Althea: A Second Book of Dialogues on Aspirations and Duties* (London: Osgood, McIlvaine, 1894), are more fiercely argued, but their genre as dialogues makes them less conclusive. The figure of Baldwin, for example, identified by Peter Gunn as Lee herself (though she herself makes that identification more difficult by a disclaimer in the Introduction), usually wins the arguments he engages in on logical grounds; but the positions he takes are seldom sympathetic to the narrator of these dialogues who sometimes undermines Baldwin's victory with a trenchant comment.

¹² Vernon Lee, *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887, pp. 210, 211, 205.

¹³ See in particular *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (London: John Lane at the Bodley Head, 1912).

¹⁴ Vernon Lee, *Miss Brown: A Novel* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1884), facsimile edition in the series *The Decadent Consciousness: A Hidden Archive of Late Victorian Literature*, eds. Ian Fletcher and John Stokes (New York and London: Garland, 1978). The novel tells the story of Anne Brown and the choice she must make between her two suitors, a manly upright cousin named Richard Brown, an industrialist and social reformer, and an effete aristocratic poet named Walter Hamlin. Hamlin discovers Anne working as a nursery maid. He settles on her a sum of money to enable her to achieve an education, with the possibility of marrying him at some later date. He is described as feeling that 'his life should be crowned by gradually endowing with vitality, and then wooing, awakening the love of this beautiful Galatea whose soul he had moulded, even as Pygmalion had moulded the limbs of the image which he had made to live and love' (Vol 1, p. 121). Richard, on the other hand, seeks to make her socially useful. Anne cannot opt out of the choice of suitors, and in the end, marries Walter Hamlin because she wants to rescue him from the clutches of his wicked cousin, Madame Elanguine (who owes something of her conception to James's Madame Merle). We know, however, at the end of the novel, that Anne will not be happy in her marriage to Walter, but she is denied any positive choice. James was unhappy about the novel, and about the dedication. His dislike of Vernon Lee was cemented when she satirised his character in the figure of Jervase Marion in her novella 'Lady Tal,' published in *Vanitas: Polite Stories* in 1892. John Sutherland has argued that James's *The Tragic Muse* (1889-90) was written as an attempt to redress the errors of taste in Vernon Lee's book, as well as being a response to Mrs Humphry Ward's 1884 novel *Miss Bretherton*. See John Sutherland, 'Miss Bretherton, Miss Brown and Miss Rooth' in *Victorian Fiction: Writers, Publishers, Readers* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 133-150.

¹⁵ Irene Cooper-Willis (ed.), *Vernon Lee's Letters*, pp. 364-5.

- ¹⁶ She did, however, write an historical novel, *Penelope Brandling: A Tale of the Welsh Coast in the Eighteenth Century* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1903).
- ¹⁷ Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935*, p. 129.
- ¹⁸ Diana Fuss (ed.), *Inside/Out; Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 3.
- ¹⁹ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 28-65.
- ²⁰ Alan Sinfield argues that 'decadence ... lingers trembling on the brink of homosexuality' though that does not necessarily mean that the two terms correspond absolutely. On the other hand, following Sedgwick, it would appear that decadence and male same-sex desire are constructed as having a 'peculiarly close, though never precisely defined, affinity.' Presumably, because male same-sex desire is more visible than its female counterpart, there is more need to define it and to attack it, smearing both terms, decadence and homosexuality, with the subversive stain of the other. Thus to call a lesbian fiction decadent might of itself be a dissident act because it renders the term visible; but also because it implies a potency of female desire which needs to be policed by labelling it decadent. See Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, p. 93; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 128.
- ²¹ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1981), p. 23.
- ²² Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' in *The Penguin Freud Library, Volume 14, Art and Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 363-4.
- ²³ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, p. 66.
- ²⁴ Vernon Lee, *A Phantom Lover: A Fantastic Story* (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood and Sons, 1886); this story was reprinted with the title 'Oke of Okehurst; or, The Phantom Lover' in Lee's first collection of short stories entitled *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (London: William Heinemann, 1890). References to this second edition of the story appear in parenthesis in the text.
- ²⁵ Anonymous review, 'Novels of the Week', *Athenaeum*, 12 April, 1890, 467.
- ²⁶ Vernon Lee, 'A Wicked Voice,' first printed in *Hauntings*, 1890, reprinted in Irene Cooper-Willis (ed.), *Vernon Lee, Supernatural Tales* (London: Peter Owen, 1987). References to the story are to this edition in parenthesis in the text; this is because the original volume which I was able to consult had a number of pages missing or damaged.
- ²⁷ Vernon Lee was particularly interested in the physical effects of aesthetic objects, as her works on psychological aesthetics testify. She insists that where art is truly achieved, it produces not stasis in the viewer (or hearer), but traceable movements which replicate the shapes of the perceived object. In this story, however, Zaffirino's musical forms threaten the narrator with the formlessness of ecstasy, so that the bodily response is both pleasurable and potentially fatal.
- ²⁸ The story was first published in *Murray's Magazine* I (1887), 49-69; it was reprinted in *Hauntings* in 1890, and it is to this edition that references in the text are made.
- ²⁹ The story was first published in *The Yellow Book* 10 (1896), 289-344. It was subsequently reprinted in *Pope Jacynth and Other Fantastic Tales* (London: Grant Richards, 1904). References in the text are to *The Yellow Book* edition.
- ³⁰ Burdett Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination*, p. 21.
- ³¹ It is, on the other hand, a commonplace of discussion of *The Yellow Book* to say that its character as a handbook of decadence altered out of recognition after the rigours of the Wilde trials and dismissal of Aubrey Beardsley. Holbrook Jackson, for example, suggests that after April 1896, 'save for its yellow covers, *The Yellow Book* was hardly to be distinguished from any other high class magazine in book form,' and John Stokes quotes a correspondent to the *Daily Chronicle* who remarked with satisfaction that he had seen '*The Yellow Book* turn grey in a single night.' I would suggest, however, that Lee's story can be used as evidence that decadence had not disappeared from *The Yellow Book*. See Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties* [1913] (London: The Cresset Library, 1987), p. 53; John Stokes, *In the Nineties* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 7.
- ³² The Lilith myth is narrated in *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*. For an analysis of Cleopatra's exotic, erotic and wicked consummation with the asp, see Lucy Hughes Hallett, *Cleopatra: Histories, Dreams and Distortions* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990).
- ³³ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979). This

is a central phrase in this text, placed against 'the impropriety of female creation' as a dual explanation for women's difficulties in finding modes of self-expression in the nineteenth century.

³⁴ Gardner's evidence hardly seems conclusive — consisting of the fact that during 1882, she and Mary 'ran away together' to a cottage in Wales, and that they exchanged some rather jokey letters. See Burdett Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination*, pp. 163-171.

Afterword

‘And upon this body we may press our lips’

And now there opened for him a new way of communion with the Greek life. Hitherto he had handled the words only of Greek poetry, stirred indeed and roused by them, yet divining beyond the words an unexpressed pulsation of sensuous life. Suddenly he is in contact with that life still fervent in the relics of plastic art. Filled as our culture is with the classical spirit, we can hardly imagine how deeply the human mind was moved when at the Renaissance, in the midst of a frozen world, the buried fire of ancient art rose up from under the soil. Winckelmann here reproduces for us the earlier sentiments of the Renaissance. On a sudden the imagination feels itself free. How facile and direct, it seems to say, is this life of the senses and the understanding when once we have apprehended it! That is the more liberal life we have been seeking so long, so near to us all the while. How mistaken and roundabout have been our efforts to reach it by mystic passion and religious reverie; how they have deflowered the flesh; how little they have emancipated us! Hermione melts from her stony posture, and the lost proportions of life right themselves. There, is an instance of Winckelmann’s tendency to escape from abstract theory to intuition, to the exercise of sight and touch.

Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873)¹

I have seen her [Eleanora Duse] before a Rodin. ... As she handled the little piece of clay in which two figures suggested, not expressed, embrace passionately, in a tightening quiver of the whole body, which seems to thrill under one’s eyesight, it seemed as if force drank in force until the soul of the woman passed into the clay, and the soul of the clay passed into the woman.

Arthur Symonds, ‘Eleanora Duse’ (1900), from *Studies in Seven Arts*²

... some few years ago I had gone with her [Vernon Lee] and Kit [Clementina Anstruther Thomson] to the Vatican, when, pulling up before what Baedeker rather unnecessarily described as a Roman copy of a Greek bust of Apollo, but which Il Palmerino had decided was a Greek original, Vernon suddenly said: ‘Kit! show us that bust!’ Kit’s proceedings were remarkable; in dead silence she advanced, then retreated, shaded her eyes, and then ejaculated: ‘Look at that Johnny! how he sings! ... how he sings!’ Various technical details were then pointed out as proving their contention, though Vernon considered these less important than the ‘singing’ quality discovered by her friend. And afterwards, when I privately expressed my opinion of this style of Art Criticism, Vernon was very angry and begged me not to ‘expose’ myself.

Ethel Smyth on the process of Lee’s psychological aesthetics.³

There was only one piece of evidence left against him. The picture itself — that was evidence. He would destroy it. Why had he kept it so long? Once it had given him pleasure to watch it changing and growing old. Of late he had felt no such pleasure. It had kept him awake at night. ... Its mere memory had marred many moments of joy. It has been like conscience to him. Yes, it had been conscience. He would destroy it. ... He seized the [knife], and stabbed the picture with it.

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)⁴

Pater's essay on Winckelmann, with its praise for the tactile physical origins of aesthetic sensation, provides an image of the decadent moment. The man sees the work of art and reaches out to touch it; but unlike Wilde's tale of Charmides, the contact between human flesh and stone is a transcendent moment of fulfilment, not a desecration. The flesh is deflowered only if contact is *not* made between the physical body and its artistic representation. And consequently the conventional attitude to art, that it *arrests* the responses into stasis, is disrupted by becoming an explicitly sensuous, quasi-erotic experience. Decadence, that is, depends on the physical performance of a physical response to art.

All three of the writers examined here play out this definition of decadence as a mode of potential (sexual) ecstasy, whether it is fulfilled or not. For Wilde, reaching out to art meant many things. The striking of successive poses in his poetic writing also subverts, like Pater's Winckelmann, the concept of art as pure and static. The poses never last long; they are always available to changing mood and circumstance. This, however, has its price in that if you live out your life as a kinetic work of art there is no resting place beyond the liminal space of decadent performance. As Lord Alfred Douglas said to Wilde, when he was not on his artistic pedestal, he ceased to be interesting.⁵ In Wilde's writing love is always doomed — 'For each man kills the thing he loves.' And Dorian stabs his own portrait because it will not stay the same, because it will never again register a perfected moment. Wilde's conception of decadence is based on a performance from which there is no escape except through death; if the attitudes are dramatic, then the play is a tragedy.

In the fiction and poetry of Arthur Symons, the decadent situation is similar to Wilde's, but the attitude to it is different. He too represents himself as a figure who stands on the border between the real and the artistic representation of the real. He looks on, but as part of the audience he is also part of the process of representation, and he becomes himself part of the scene which is represented. For Symons, like Wilde, there is a cost to this liminal position: he finds himself 'chained in an impotence of rage'

to his seat in the stalls of a music hall. But his terror is less urgent because, as a member of the audience, he can also watch the performance, and take pleasure in the feelings it arouses. His position is between detachment and involvement. He looks on and interprets what he sees; in doing so, he modifies what he sees, and regains some control over the spectacle, and over himself, the spectator. Moreover, his isolation is tempered by transitory moments of consummated passion, when he reaches across the footlights and touches the artistic body of the dancer. Love might not last; but it does him no actual harm. If Lee and Wilde write of doomed desire, Symons writes of repeatedly satisfied desire, as if, for the heterosexual male artist, decadence resides in desires which are consummated and which then recur in a never-ending series of one-night stands.

In her stories, Lee deals with decadent subjects, but is not quite decadent in herself because the fictions render the writer as a performing subject of decadence at least elusive, and perhaps invisible. But in her work on psychological aesthetics, she plays out Winckelmann's lesson in writings which are almost (but perhaps not quite — they are written in the register of scientific objectivity) love letters to the physical sensitivity of her collaborator, Clementina (Kit) Anstruther Thomson, and her responses to art. Lee takes the etymological meaning of aesthetics as having to do with 'feeling' literally, and locates the aesthetic response in the body rather than in the mind. Kit, she says is a perfect collaborator, because for her, 'there is a constant interest in locomotion and manipulation, ... a thinking in terms of *bodily movement*' because she has been an athlete, a rider, a dancer and an artist from her earliest years.⁶ With her particular sensitivities, Kit can think and feel herself *into* the objects she views — can empathise with them.⁷ And Lee values this bodily response as an artistic consummation, the consummation which she could not imagine or articulate when she wrote her fictions, because, on the Queen Victoria principle, her desire had no fleshly shape. And, as Ethel Smyth's comments testify, this desire can be dismissed as rather silly, as some kind of joke, because female desire is somehow unimaginable.

Decadence is difficult to define because it is a deliberately transgressive mode which breaks down boundaries wherever it finds them. At the end of the nineteenth century it was, I think, particularly bound up with the matrix of meanings around sex, gender and sexuality — sexual politics. The decadent 'performed' acts of transgression, inhabiting liminal spaces between art and life, between convention and taboo, between normality and perversity. The more evidence of performance — the more an audience could imagine that the writer committed the acts of which he (and — perhaps — she) wrote, the more decadent the work, the more decadent the writer.

Notes

¹ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 146-7, 1873 text.

² Arthur Symonds, *Studies in Seven Arts* (London: Archibald Constable and Co. Ltd, 1906), p. 333.

³ Ethel Smyth, *What Happened Next* (London, 1940), quoted in Burdett Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination (Victorian Style): A Psychological and Critical Study of 'Vernon Lee'* (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1987), p. 217.

⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* [1891] in Merlin Holland (ed.), *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), pp. 158-9.

⁵ See *De Profundis* in Rupert Hart-Davis (ed.), *The Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 167-68.

⁶ Vernon Lee with Clementina Anstruther Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1913), p. 136, emphasis in original. In these terms, Kit is a more intimate embodiment of Symonds's imagined figure of the dancer, about whom, Yeats says, 'her body thinks.'

⁷ Lee did not originate the term, but she is responsible for having introduced it into English criticism in her translation of the German word, *Einfühlung*. See *Beauty and Ugliness*, p. 13.

Bibliography of Works Quoted or Consulted

- Ackroyd, Peter, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1983)
- Adams, James Eli, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Manhood* (Ithaca and London: 1995)
- Anon. [Walter Pater], 'Vernon Lee's "Juvenilia"', *Pall Mall Gazette* (5 August, 1887), 5
- Anon, 'Novels of the Week', *Athenaeum* (12 April, 1890), 467
- Ardis, Ann, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990)
- Armstrong, Isobel, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993)
- Arnold, Matthew, *Selected Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York: Signet Classics, 1972)
- Arnold, Matthew, *Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: J. M. Dent, 1993)
- Matthew Arnold, *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. George W. E. Russell (London: Macmillan, 1896)
- Ash, Russell, *Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema* (London: Michael Joseph, n.d.)
- Balakian, Anna, *The Symbolist Movement: A Critical Reappraisal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967)
- Barret-Ducrocq, Françoise, *Love in the Time of Victoria: Sexuality, Class and Gender in Nineteenth-Century London*, translated John Howe (London and New York: Verso, 1991)
- [Barry, W. F.], 'Realism and Decadence in French Fiction', *Quarterly Review*, 171 (July, 1890), 57-90
- [Barry, W. F.], 'The French Decadence', *Quarterly Review*, 174 (April, 1892), 479-504
- Bartlett, Neil, *Who Was that Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988)
- Bashford, Bruce 'Oscar Wilde as Theorist: The Case of *De Profundis*', *English Literature in Transition*, 28, no. 4 (1985), 395-406
- Battersby, Christine, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: The Women's Press, 1989)
- Baudelaire, Charles, *Les fleurs du mal et autres poèmes* [1857], ed. Henri Lemaître (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1964)

- Baudelaire, Charles, *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, ed. and translated P. E. Charvet (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972)
- Baugh, Edward, 'Arthur Symons: A Centenary Tribute', *Review of English Literature*, 6, no. iii (1965), 70-80
- Beckson, Karl, and John M. Munro, 'Symons, Browning and the Development of the Modern Aesthetic', *Studies in English Literature*, 10 (1970), 687-699
- Beckson, Karl (ed), *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971)
- Beckson, Karl, *Arthur Symons, A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987)
- Beckson, Karl (ed.), *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters, 1880-1935* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989)
- Beckson, Karl, Ian Fletcher, Lawrence W. Markert and John Stokes (eds), *Arthur Symons: A Bibliography* (Greensboro, N. Carolina: ELT Press, 1990)
- Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana Press, 1973)
- Bergonzi, Bernard (ed), *Poetry 1870-1914*, Longman English Series (London: Longman Group, 1980)
- Birkett, Jennifer, *The Sins of the Fathers: Decadence in France, 1870-1914* (London and New York: Quartet, 1986)
- Borland, Maureen, *Wilde's Devoted Friend: A Life of Robert Ross, 1869-1918* (Oxford: Lennard Publishing, 1990)
- Bradfield, Thomas, 'A Dominant Note of Some Recent Fiction', *Westminster Review*, 142 (1894), 537-545
- Bradbury, Malcolm and David Palmer (eds), *Decadence and the Eighteen Nineties*, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, 17 (London: Edward Arnold, 1978)
- Brake, Laurel, *Subjugated Knowledges: Journalism, Gender and Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994)
- Brake, Laurel, *Walter Pater* (Plymouth: Northcote House, The British Council, 1994)
- Bristow, Joseph, *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing after 1885* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995)
- Calinescu, Matei, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism; Avant-Garde; Decadence; Kitsch; Post-Modernism*, second edition (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987)
- Carpenter, Alfred Edward, *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature, 1830-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950)
- Castle, Terry, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1993)
- Charlesworth, Barbara, *Dark Passages: The Decadent Consciousness in Victorian Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965)

- Clements, Patricia, *Baudelaire and the English Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985)
- Cohen, Ed, *Talk on the Wilde Side: Towards a Genealogy of a Discourse on Male Sexualities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993)
- Cohen, Philip K., *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde* (London: London and Associated University Presses, 1978)
- Colls, Robert and Philip Dodd (eds), *Englishness, Politics and Culture* (London: Croom Helm, 1986)
- Cooper-Willis, Irene (ed.), *Vernon Lee's Letters* (London: privately printed, 1937)
- Culler, Jonathan, *The Pursuit of Signs* (London: Methuen, 1981)
- D'Arch-Smith, Timothy, *Love in Earnest: Some Notes on the Lives and Writings of English Uranian Poets from 1889-1930* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970)
- Dellamora, Richard, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (London and Chapel Hill: University of California Press, 1990)
- Delaura, David J., *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England: Newman, Arnold, Pater* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1969)
- Denny, Norman (ed.), *The Yellow Book, A Collection* (London: Spring Books, n.d.)
- Derrida, Jacques, *Of Grammatology*, translated Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976)
- Derrida, Jacques, *Writing and Difference*, translated Allan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978)
- Derrida, Jacques, *The Truth in Painting*, translated Geoff Bennington and Ian MacLeod (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987)
- Dijkstra, Bram, 'The Androgyne in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature', *Comparative Literature*, 26 (1974), 62-73
- Dijkstra, Bram, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986)
- Dollimore, Jonathan, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991)
- Dowling, Linda, 'The Aesthetes and the Eighteenth Century', *Victorian Studies* 20 (1977), 357-377
- Dowling, Linda, 'The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890s', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 33 (1979), 434-453
- Dowling, Linda, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986)

- Dowling, Linda, 'Letter Press and the Picture in the Literary Periodicals of the 1890s', *Yearbook of English Studies* 16 (1986), 117-131
- Dowling, Linda, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994)
- Du Maurier, George, *Trilby* [1894] (London: Everyman, 1994)
- Dyos, H. J., and Michael Wolff (eds), *The Victorian City: Images and Reality*, 2 volumes (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973)
- Edel, Leon, *The Life of Henry James*, 2 volumes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977)]
- Eliot, T. S., *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1975)
- Ellmann, Richard (ed.), *Edwardians and Late Victorians* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960)
- Ellmann, Richard, *Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988)
- Epstein Nord, Deborah, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation and the City* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995)
- Evans, Laurence (ed.), *The Letters of Walter Pater* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970)
- Fletcher, Ian, 'The Little Magazines', in Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (eds), *Decadence and the 1890s*, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, 17 (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), pp. 174-206
- Fletcher, Ian, 'Explorations and Recoveries — Symons, Yeats and the Demonic Dance' in *W. B. Yeats and His Contemporaries* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987), pp. 252-266
- Flanagan Behrendt, Patricia, *Oscar Wilde: Eros and Aesthetics*: (London: Macmillan, 1991)
- Foucault, Michel, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, translated Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977)
- Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated Allan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982)
- Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality: an Introduction*, vol I, translated Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984)
- Frey, Julia, *Toulouse-Lautrec, A Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994)
- Fuss, Diana (ed.), *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991)
- Gagnier, Regenia, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1987)

Galsworthy, John, *The Forsyte Saga*, 3 volumes [1906-1920] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978)

Gardner, Burdett, *The Lesbian Imagination (Victorian Style): A Psychological and Critical Study of 'Vernon Lee'* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987)

Gautier, Théophile, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Volume IX [1881] (Reprint, Geneva, 1978)

Gautier, Théophile, *Baudelaire par Théophile Gautier*, ed. Claude-Marie Senninger (Paris: Klincksieck, 1986)

Gay, Peter, *The Bourgeois Experience, Victoria to Freud*, Volume 1, *The Education of the Senses* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Gerber, Helmut E., 'The Nineties: Beginning, End or Transition?' in *Edwardians and Late Victorians*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), pp. 50-79

Gibbons, Tom, *Rooms in the Darwin Hotel: Studies in English Literary Criticism and Ideas* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 1973)

Gide, André, *The Immoralist* [1902], translated Dorothy Bussy (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960)

Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979)

Gilman, Richard, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1979)

Gissing, George, *New Grub Street* [1891] (London: Oxford University Press, 1958)

Gissing, George, *The Odd Women* [1893] (London: Virago, 1980)

Goldfarb, Russell M., 'Late Victorian Decadence', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 20 (1962), 369-373

Goldfarb, Russell M., 'Arthur Symons's Decadent Poetry', *Victorian Poetry*, 1 (1963), 231-234

Goodman, Jonathan (ed), *The Oscar Wilde File* (London: W. H. Allen, 1989)

Gordon, Jan B., 'The Dialogue of Life and Art in Arthur Symons's *Spiritual Adventures*', *English Literature in Transition*, 12 (1969), 105-117

Gordon, Jan B., 'The *Danse Macabre* of Arthur Symons's *London Nights*', *Victorian Poetry*, 9 (1971), 429-443

Grand, Sarah, *The Heavenly Twins* [1893], ed. Carol A. Senf (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1993)

Green, R. J., 'Oscar Wilde's *Intentions*: an Early Modernist Manifesto', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 13 (1973), 397-404

- Greene, Gayle and Coppelina Kahn (eds), *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* [1985] (London and New York: Routledge, 1990)
- Greenslade, William, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)
- Guy, Josephine M., *The British Avant-Garde: The Theory and Politics of Tradition* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991)
- Haley, Bruce, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978)
- Hart-Davis, Rupert (ed.), *Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979)
- Hart-Davis, Rupert (ed.), *More Letters of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987)
- Hennegan, Alison, 'Personalities and Principles: Aspects of Life and Culture in *fin-de-siècle* England' in Mikulas Teich and Roy Porter (eds), *Fin de Siècle and its Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 170-215
- Harris, Frank, *Oscar Wilde* [1916] (New York: Dorset Press, 1989)
- Hilliard, David, 'UnEnglish and Unmanly: Anglo-Catholicism and Homosexuality', *Victorian Studies*, 25 (1982), 181-210
- Hillier, Bevis, 'New Light Thrown on Two Literary Giants', *The Times* (17 June, 1968), 8
- Hobsbawm, E. J., *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (London: Sphere Books, 1989)
- Holcombe, Lee, 'Victorian Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law, 1857-1882', in Martha Vicinus (ed.), *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (London: Methuen and Co., 1980), pp. 3-28
- Holland, Vyvyan, *Son of Oscar Wilde* [1953] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)
- Horne, Peter and Reina Lewis (eds), *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1996)
- Hough, Graham, *The Last Romantics* [1949] (London: Duckworth and Co., 1979)
- Hughes Hallet, Lucy, *Cleopatra: Histories, Dreams and Distortions* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990)
- Hyde, H. Montgomery (ed.), *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (London: William Hodge and Co. Ltd, 1947)
- Hyde, H. Montgomery, *Famous Trials 7: Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962)
- Hyde, Mary (ed.), *Bernard Shaw and Alfred Douglas: A Correspondance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989)
- Image, Selwyn, 'In November Last, at the London Institution and the Covent Garden Opera House', *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, 6 (1891), 29-34

- Jackson, Holbrook, *The 1890s* [1913] (London: The Cresset Library, 1988)
- Jackson, Rosemary, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981)
- James, Henry, *The House of Fiction*, ed. Leon Edel (London: Mercury Books, 1962)
- Jeffreys, Sheila (ed), *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930* (London and Boston: Faber, 1985)
- Jeffreys, Sheila (ed), *The Sexuality Debates* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987)
- Lionel Johnson, 'A Note Upon the Practice and Theory of Verse at the Present Time Obtaining in France', *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, 6 (1891), 61-66
- Joyce, James, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* [1916] (London: Granada Publishing, 1977)
- Joyce, James, *Ulysses* [1922] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986)
- Jullian, Philippe, *Oscar Wilde* (St. Albans: Granada Publishing, 1977)
- Kermode, Frank, *Romantic Image* [1957] (London: RKP, Ark Paperbacks, 1986)
- Kermode, Frank, 'Poet and Dancer Before Diaghilev' in *Puzzles and Epiphanies: Essays and Reviews, 1958-61* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), pp. 1-19
- Kermode, Frank, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theories of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966)
- Kermode, Frank (ed), *British Poetry and Prose, 1870-1905* [The Oxford Authors Series] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987)
- Kohl, Norbert, *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel*, translated David Henry Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)
- Kristeva, Julia, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986)
- Ledger, Sally, 'The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism' in Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (eds), *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 22-44
- Ledger, Sally, and Scott McCracken (eds), *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)
- Lee, Vernon, *Belcaro: Being Sundry Essays on Aesthetical Questions* [first edition, 1881] (London: T Fisher Unwin, 1887)
- Lee, Vernon, *Euphorion* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1884)
- Lee, Vernon, *Baldwin: Being Dialogues on Views and Aspirations* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1886)

- Lee, Vernon, *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (London: William Heinemann, 1890)
- Lee, Vernon, *Vanitas: Polite Stories* (London: William Heinemann, 1892)
- Lee, Vernon, 'The Craft of Words', *The New Review*, XI (1894), 571-80
- Lee, Vernon, *Althea: Being a Second Series of Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: Osgood McIlvaine, 1894)
- Lee, Vernon, *Renaissance Fancies and Studies: Being a Sequel to "Euphorion"* (London: Smith Elder, 1895)
- Lee, Vernon, 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady', *The Yellow Book*, X (July, 1896), 289-344
- Lee, Vernon, 'The Aesthetics of the Novel', *Literature* (29 July, 1899), 98-100
- Lee, Vernon, *Ariadne in Mantua* [first edition 1903] (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1930)
- Lee, Vernon, *Gospels of Anarchy* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908)
- Lee, Vernon, 'The Handling of Words', *The English Review*, IX, no. 3 (October, 1911), 441-448
- Lee, Vernon and C. Anstruther Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1913)
- Lee, Vernon, *The Beautiful* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913)
- Lee, Vernon, *The Handling of Words and Other Studies in Literary Psychology* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1923)
- Le Gallienne, Richard, 'Considerations Suggested by Mr. Churton Collins's "Illustrations of Tennyson"', *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, 7 (1892), 77-83
- Le Gallienne, Richard, *Retrospective Reviews: A Literary Log*, 2 volumes (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1896)
- Lowry, Howard Foster (ed.), *Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930)
- Lucas, John, 'Hopkins and Symonds: Two Views of the City' in John Stokes (ed.), *Fin de Siècle/Fin du Globe: Fears and Fantasies of the Late Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 52-68
- Mallarmé, Stéphane, *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays and Letters*, ed and translated Bradford Cook (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1956)
- Mangam, Teresa, 'Style Wars of the 1890s: The New Woman and the Decadent', in Nikki Lee Manos and Meri-Jane Rochelson (eds), *Transforming Genres: New Approaches to British Fiction of the 1890s* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), pp. 47-66
- Manos, Nikki Lee, and Meri-Jane Rochelson (eds), *Transforming Genres: New Approaches to British Fiction of the 1890s* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994)

- Mannocchi, Phyllis F., "'Vernon Lee': A Reintroduction and Primary Bibliography", *English Literature in Transition*, 26, no. 4 (1983), 231-267
- Marcus, Steven, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* [1966] (London: Corgi Books, 1969)
- Marks, Elaine and Isabelle de Courtrivon (eds), *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981)
- Marsh, Jan, *Pre-Raphaelite Women: Images of Femininity in Pre-Raphaelite Art* (London: Guild Publishing, 1987)
- Mikhail, E. H. (ed.), *W. B. Yeats: Interviews and Recollections*, 2 volumes (London: Macmillan, 1977)
- Mill, John Stuart, *Literary Essays*, ed. Edward Alexander (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc., 1967)
- Miller, J. Hillis, *Versions of Pygmalion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990)
- Mitchell, Juliet and Jacqueline Rose, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982)
- Mitterand, Henri, 'De l'écriture artiste au style décadent', *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*, 18 (1969), 617-623
- Miyoshi, Masao, *The Divided Self: A Perspective on the Literature of the Victorians* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1969)
- Morgan, Thaïs E., 'Perverse Male Bodies: Simeon Solomon and Algernon Charles Swinburne' in Peter Horne and Reina Lewis (eds), *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1996). pp. 61-85
- [Morley, John], 'Mr. Pater's Essays', *Fortnightly Review*, 19 (April, 1873), 469-477
- Morris, Bruce, 'Symons, Yeats and *The Knave of Hearts*', *Notes and Queries*, 31 (1984), 509-11
- Morris, Bruce, 'Mallarmé's Letters to Arthur Symons', *English Literature in Transition*, 28, no. 4 (1985), 346-353
- Mort, Frank, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England since 1830* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987)
- Munro, John M., *Arthur Symons* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1969)
- Nassaar, Christopher S., *Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974)
- Nead, Lynda, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988)
- Nead, Lynda, *The Female Nude: Art Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992)

Noble, James Ashcroft, 'The Sexuality of Fiction', *Contemporary Review*, 67 (1895), 490-98

Nordau, Max, *Degeneration* [first published, 1892; first English publication, 1895], introduced by George L. Mosse, facsimile edition (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993)

Olson, Stanley, *John Singer Sargent, His Portrait* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986)

O'Neal, Michael J., 'The Syntactic Style of Arthur Symons' *Language and Style*, 15 (1982), 208-218

O'Neal, Michael J., 'English Decadence and the Concept of Visual Perspective', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 23 (1983), 240-251

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955)

Pater, Walter, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1873)

Pater, Walter, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry, the 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1980)

Pater, Walter, *Marius the Epicurean, His Sensations and Ideas*, 2 volumes (London: Macmillan and Co., 1885)

Pater, Walter, *Imaginary Portraits* [1887] (London: Macmillan and Co, 1929)

Pearsall, Ronald, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969)

Penny, Nicholas, 'Goddesses and Girls', *London Review of Books*, 20 (2-29 December, 1982), 3-5

Peters, Robert L., 'The Salome of Arthur Symons and Aubrey Beardsley', *Criticism*, 2 (1960), 150-163

Pick, Daniel, *Faces of Degeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)

Pittock, Murray H., *Spectrum of Decadence: The Literature of the 1890s* (London: Routledge, 1993)

Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History: A Selection*, translated John F. Healey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991)

Poggioli, Renato, *The Theory of the Avant Garde* [1962], translated Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968)

Poovey, Mary, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1980)

Priddin, Deirdre, *The Art of the Dance in French Literature, from Théophile Gautier to Paul Valéry*, (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1952)

- Quiller-Couch, Sir Arthur, *On the Art of Writing* [1913] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928)
- Quilter, Harry, 'The Gospel of Intensity', *Contemporary Review*, 67 (1895), 761-82
- Ransome, Arthur, *Oscar Wilde, A Critical Study* [1912] (London: Methuen and Co., 1913)
- Riffaterre, Michel, 'Decadent Features in Maeterlinck's Poetry', *Language and Style* 7 (1974), 3-19
- Rossetti, D. G., *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Ellis, 1911)
- Ruskin, John, *The Works of John Ruskin: Library Edition*, eds E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904)
- Ryals, Claude de L., 'Towards a Definition of *Decadent* as Applied to British Literature of the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 17 (1958), 85-92
- Secker Martin (ed.), *The Eighteen-Nineties: A Period Anthology in Prose and Verse* (London: The Richard's Press, 1948)
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1985)
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994)
- Seiler, R. M. (ed.), *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980)
- Sinfield, Alan, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (London: Cassell, 1994)
- Shaw, W. David, 'Poetic Truth in a Scientific Age: The Victorian Perspective' in *Centre and Labyrinth: Essays in Honour of Northrop Frye*, ed. Eleanor Clark (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1983), pp. 245-263
- Shewan, Rodney, *Oscar Wilde, Art and Egotism* (London: Macmillan, 1977)
- Showalter, Elaine, *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (London: Virago, 1979)
- Showalter, Elaine, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991)
- Showalter, Elaine (ed.), *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 1993)
- Small, Ian, 'Literary Radicalism in the British Fin de Siècle' in Stokes (ed.), *Fin de Siècle/Fin du Globe: Fears and Fantasies of the Late Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 210-219
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 'Decadent Style', *Language and Style* 7 (1974), 227-234

- Sontag, Susan, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* [1966] (New York and London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1986)
- Stableford, Brian (ed.), *The Dedalus Book of Decadence (Moral Ruins)* (Sawtry: Dedalus Ltd, 1990)
- Stanford, Derek, 'Arthur Symons and Modern Poetics', *Southern Review*, new series 2 (1966), 247-253
- Stanford, Derek (ed.), *Writing of the Nineties from Wilde to Beerbohm* (New York and London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1971)
- Stein, Joseph, 'The New Woman and the Decadent Dandy', *Dalhousie Review*, 55 (1975), 42-56
- Stokes, John, *In the Nineties* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989)
- Stokes, John (ed.), *Fin de Siècle/Fin du Globe: Fears and Fantasies of the Late Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992)
- Stutfield, Hugh, E. M., 'Tommyrotics', *Blackwood's Magazine*, 157 (1895), 833-45
- Sussmann, Herbert, 'Criticism as Art: Form in Oscar Wilde's Critical Writings', *Studies in Philology* 70 (1973), 108-122
- Sutherland, John, *Victorian Fiction: Writers, Publishers, Readers* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995)
- Symonds, John Addington, *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds*, ed. Phyllis Grosskurth (New York: Random House, 1984)
- Symons, Arthur, *Days and Nights* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1889)
- Symons, Arthur, 'Paul Verlaine', *National Review*, 19 (June, 1892), 501-515
- Symons, Arthur, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 87 (November, 1893), 858-868
- Symons, Arthur, *Silhouettes* [first edition, 1892] (second edition, London: Leonard Smithers, 1896)
- Symons, Arthur, *London Nights* [first edition, 1895] (second edition, London: Leonard Smithers, 1897)
- Symons, Arthur, 'Dieppe: 1895', *The Savoy*, 1 (1896), 84-102
- Symons, Arthur, 'The Gingerbread Fair at Vincennes: A Colour Study', *The Savoy*, 4 (1896), 79-84
- Symons, Arthur, 'At the Alhambra: Impressions and Sensations', *The Savoy*, 5 (1896), 75-83
- Symons, Arthur, *Images of Good and Evil* (London: William Heinemann, 1899)
- Symons, Arthur, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: Archibald Constable and Co. Ltd, 1899)

- Symons, Arthur, *Studies in Prose and Verse* (London: J. M. Dent and Co., 1904)
- Symons, Arthur, *Spiritual Adventures* [1905] (London: Constable and Co. Ltd., 1928)
- Symons, Arthur, *Colour Studies in Paris* (London: Chapman Hall, 1918)
- Symons, Arthur, *Cities and Seacoasts and Islands* (London: W. Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1918)
- Symons, Arthur, 'The History of the Moulin Rouge', *English Review* 32 (1922), 5-12
- Symons, Arthur, *The Collected Works of Arthur Symons* in 9 volumes, Volumes 1 and 2 (London: Martin Secker, 1924)
- Symons, Arthur, *Plays, Acting and Music: A Book of Theory* [1903] (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928)
- Symons, Arthur, *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons*, ed. Karl Beckson (University Park and London: Pennsylvania University Press, 1977)
- Symons, Arthur, 'The Life and Adventures of Lucy Newcome', ed. and with a preface by Alan Johnston, *English Literature in Transition*, 28, no. 4 (1985), 332-345
- Symons, Arthur, 'An Episode in the Life of Jenny Lane' ed and with afterword by Alan Johnston, *English Literature in Transition*, 29, no. 4 (1986), 351-359
- Teich, Mikulas and Roy Porter (eds), *Fin de Siècle and its Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)
- Temple, Ruth Z., *The Critic's Alchemy* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1953)
- Thesing, William B., *The London Muse: Victorian Poetic Responses to the City* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982)
- Thornton, R. K. R., *The Decadent Dilemma* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983)
- Timms, Edward and David Kelley (eds), *Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985)
- Verlaine, Paul, *Choix de poésies*, eds Michel Dansel and André Genest (Paris: Librairie Larousse [1973], n.d.)
- Vicinus, Martha (ed), *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (London and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977)
- Walkowitz, Judith R., *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1994)
- Warner, Eric and Graham Hough (eds), *Strangeness and Beauty: An Anthology of Aesthetic Criticism, 1840-1910*, 2 volumes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983)
- Waugh, Arthur, 'Reticence in Literature', *The Yellow Book*, 1 (1894), 201-219

- Weeks, Jeffrey, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet, 1977)
- Whissen, Thomas Reed, *The Devil's Advocates: Decadence in Modern Literature* (New York: The Greenwood Press, 1989)
- Wilde, Oscar, *Intentions* (London: Heinemann and Balestrier, 1891)
- Wilde, Oscar, *The First Collected Edition of the Works of Oscar Wilde (1908-1922)*, in 15 volumes, ed. Robert Ross, esp. *The Poems of Oscar Wilde*, volume 6 (London: Methuen and Co., 1908, reprinted London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969)
- Wilde, Oscar, *Aristotle at Afternoon Tea: The Rare Oscar Wilde*, ed. John Wyse Jackson (London: Fourth Estate, 1991)
- Wilde, Oscar, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (3rd edition, Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994)
- Williams, Raymond, *Culture and Society* [1958] (London: The Hogarth Press, 1990)
- Wilson, Edmund, 'Late Violets from the Nineties', *Dial*, 75 (1923), 387-390
- Wilson, Edmund, *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* [1931] (London and Glasgow: The Fontana Library, 1961)
- Wood, Christopher, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981)
- Wordsworth, William and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 1991)
- Yeats, W. B., *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1950)
- Yeats, W. B., *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1966)
- Yeats, W. B. *The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1966)
- Zatlin, Linda Gertner, *Aubrey Beardsley and Victorian Sexual Politics* (Clarendon Studies in the History of Art, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990)